Baccano Volume1

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『一日前』
～アルヴェアーレ店内～

「これから君には、6時間ほどかけて死んでもらう事にしたよ」

簡単な装飾に包まれた部屋の中。大人びた少年が、強面の男達に取り囲まれている。

「……そう言ったらどうしますか？」

最初に物騒な冗談を言った眼鏡の男が、恵比須顔を少年に近づける。

「身に覚えが無くても謝ってしまいそうな雰囲気ですよ、今のこの部屋……」

少年は緊張しながら答えた。呼び出されて来てみれば、『組織』の上級幹部が勢ぞろいしているではないか。自分はいったい何をやらかしてしまったのだろうか？

「あの……私が何を？」

「色々と、だ。数え切れない程な」

貫禄のある大男が低い声をだす。

「頭領……いやだな、何か勘違いしてますよ。私は別に何も……」

「俺にとっちゃ、お前のその余裕を消し去る事など造作も無い事だ。たった一言、ある事を伝えればいいだけだからな」

「い…言ってみてくださいよ。その言葉を…」

少年のボスである大男は、神妙な顔をして口を開いた。

「明日、マイザーと帽子を買いに行

"We'll give you six hours to prepare for your death."

In a room with simple decorations, a boy was surrounded by a group of men with solemn faces.

"... Any response so far?"

A man with glasses smilingly looked into the boy's eyes.

"Well, I don't know what for but this room makes me feel apologetic right now..."

The boy murmured nervously. He did not expect every executive staff in the Organization to be present at once. Just what horrible deed could he have committed?

"Um... did I do any...?"

"Indeed, for countless amounts."

A man with dignified air answered in a low voice.

"Captain... no way, there must be a mistake somewhere. I don't recall anything that..."

"All I need is a word to shatter that confident look of yours. Understand?"

"S-sure, please enlighten me..."

With a strange expression, the boss finally revealed what he had in mind.

"Go buy a hat with Maiza tomorrow."

A moment of silence. While watching the quiet applause of two other staff - the secretary and the Asian elder - the boy finally understood.

"Oh... don't tell me...!"

A big, childish grin conquered his face.

"You've earned it with your distinguished services."

To shop for a hat with an executive staff. Such event held an extremely significant meaning in the Organization.

"Congratulations on your promotion."

The man with glasses approached the boy in great delight.

"Tomorrow morning, I shall see you in front of the hat store..."

「A few days later, or a few hours ago ~Train Station~

「我在這，為什麼會有這種事」
～開始～

They were such a strange pair, I tell ya.

"So this is our Capital of Hope!"

"It's overflowing (with hope)!"

I wanted to smack them in the face. Capital of Hope, you say? Do you know how many people had committed suicide since last year ? I too have lost my job then... I wasn't fired: the company itself disappeared into thin air when I went to work one morning.

Well, the guy was punched down by someone before I had a chance, though.

"Ouuuuuuuch."

"Wahhhhhh Isaac~!"

As if nothing had happened, he jumped right up and started yelling, spreading both arms toward the sky.

"This is it! This is how a Capital should be! The thrill of meeting violence without precaution! An excellent way to sharpen my six senses, I believe!"

"Let us believe indeed! But it's a bit scary!"

"Don't worry because God is on our side! Remember how we stole the clothes of a minister last time and weren't punished at all? Which means we have the God's consent for what we're doing... I'm sure of it!"

"That's amaaazing!"

I'm sure of something too: you guys are complete idiots.

"Oh Miria, I must remind you of something."

"Whaaat is it?"

"Try not to stand out too much in this town... not until our job starts."

"I see! I'll stay quiet until work then!"

Even those idiots have a job? ... I was seriously pissed back then, but I see, their so-called "job" is of that kind.

I get what they were saying now. New York is indeed a city of hope - to Mafia and criminals like them!

Hey, what exactly have they done? It must be big enough to actually move the federal guys like you, right?

... Wait, what are you laughing at?

Oh, after that? Well... they said something along the lines of...

"Alright then, let's find a hat store first!"

"Hat store indeed!"

Is that all? You don't need to thank me. Find me a job instead. You don't want me to follow their path eventually, no?

... I don't want to cling to any twisted hope from the backstreet yet, y'know.

「A few minutes ago ~On the road~

With no sign of conversation at sight, the narrow space in the car was occupied by silence and solitude.

The female driver thought to herself.

Please let this painful silence stay forever.

There is no meaning to my existence. She envied everyone who had the confidence to identify oneself in such a hopeless way.

A meaningless existence. How wonderful would that be. In other words, those people were able to make independent decisions on how to waste their time in life. Wouldn't that be the ultimate definition of freedom?

To their contrary, she had to live with a clear meaning.

A tool of the old man behind her. That was the entire purpose to her existence, as well as a destiny she could not disobey.

Loneliness is a product of having nobody but yourself to love. While her presence was sought by the old man at a regular basis, she was still very much alone.

Which is precisely why she adored silence. It was the only time she could stay alive without having to follow orders.

But her beloved silence was ruthlessly interrupted by the voice of an insensitive old man.

"If the Elixir was indeed complete - finish off all nuisances."

"Yes."

"I'll do it myself. You only have to keep the rest from screaming while I'm at it. Isn't that easy?"

"Yes."

She thought, *how unbiased could this elder be?* Including herself, he treated every living being equally regardless of race, gender, age, values, good or evil, past or future... Everyone was a mere tool in his eyes, everything was to be disposed of when deemed useless or unnecessary.

"Are we in the city now...? avoid the main streets."

"Yes."

The female driver stopped thinking to herself. Inside of her brain was a pro's calculation of road shortcuts that would lead them to the final destination efficiently.

Then the car turned to the backstreet - right around the corner of a hat store.

「Immediately before ~Gandor Family~

Berga: "Yo, why's the marking for Ace of Spades so huge? Change. "

Luck: "It's an old custom of England. A good number of businesses were obliged to provide a special design for the largest card (in a Poker set), usually featuring a company's trademark or symbol. Change."

Berga: "I see. What now, all of those Kings look the same. Are they triplet or something?"

Luck: "I heard that the King of Diamonds was modeled after Julius Caesar."

Berga: "Who the hell is Caesar? And then this guy, the Jack's face pisses me off somehow... oh yeah, doesn't he look like that intruder we finished off last time?"

Luck: "How would I know? His face was like minced meat (by the time I arrived) because of you... No, I'm out. I don't think I can win against a Three-Card."

Berga: "... huh? How did you know I had trip-3s?"

Luck: "... are you seriously asking me that?"

Keith: "... ..." (flips cards)

Berga: "Ah."

Luck: "Five-Card..."

Berga: "Damn it! Yo big bro, can we stop using Jokers in Poker?"

Luck: "The God of Death sure likes to keep Keith-bro company.."

Keith: "... ..."

Berga: "Idiot, shouldn't it be the other way around? Big bro is a fan of the Death God instead!"

Luck: "Is that so... oh, seems like the Death God's real favorite is here."

Keith: "... ..."

Jogi: "Ah... Boss, you're all here."

Berga: "Okay, now sit."

Luck: "Mr. Jogi... would you like to play some Poker?"

Jogi: "H-huh..."

Keith: "... ..."

Jogi: "By the way, there were lots of policemen hanging around the hat store this morning... did something happen?"

Luck: "Ahh, I'll talk about that later... since it had something to do with you as well."

Epilogue -- Part 1

Why did something like this have happen to me?

“Face to wall!”

'Feisu' was face... 'wo-ru' therefore had to mean wall... ah ah, that “tu-“, what was it again? But these guys didn't really seem to care whether I understood English or not. Why did I say that?... Before their warning (or at least I thought it was), my head was already pushed up against the stone wall.

This all began with a lucky draw on a commercial street in Japan.

“Cooongrattulations---! The grand prize, a 5-day, 3-night trip to New Yo--------rk!”

As he shouted in a voice piercing enough to sever blood vessels, the bell at the side started ringing *garan garan*.

Garan garan garan garan garan...

With the clamor of the bell still sounding in my ear, I was on the streets of New York.

Actually, all I really wanted was the second prize.

I threaded through the forest of skyscrapers in the direction of Manhattan Bridge. I wanted to have some Chinese food in China Town. If I couldn't decide on what to eat then I'd just have ramen. This was common sense that applied anywhere in the world.

Even though they called it a grand prize, naturally they gave only the barest minimum of travel funds. As such, this trip was not as luxurious as I'd imagined. It was a trip for two, so I sold the spare ticket at an exchange shop and was able to scrape together some spending money.

That New York had Japan's beef gyūdon chain stores touched my heart (in terms of money). But the shop name was in romaji, so somehow it still didn't seem quite right. I hadn't been in New York for more than a day and I already felt like I hadn't seen kanji for a very long time.

I mused over this thought as I ambled around aimlessly, when the sound of some commotion caught my ear.

Five or six youngsters had gathered in a small alleyway, stirring up a racket. They seemed to be surrounding something, so I edged closer for a little look. Then, the youngest-looking of the lot grabbed my arm, laughing 'luk-ku, luk-ku.'

What was it?

My curiosity piqued, I turned my gaze to the center of the crowd.

--- What, there was nothing there?

Just as I was about to say so, I was given a shock. With a loud cry, those youngsters charged at me.

What came after that was, obviously, the opening of this chapter.

I had thought that, if I ever became involved in such trouble, I could deal with it by just relying on my own judgment... but the reality was that I didn't even have time to react.

I had no clue what happened to me after that. When I regained consciousness, I was already lying on the sun-baked asphalt road. Needless to say, by the time I got back to my feet, those youngsters had long escaped around the corner of the alley.

Great, I wasn't killed. This thankful thought crossed my mind, then I realized all my belongings were stolen... so everything wasn't alright after all. In theory one should be thankful for keeping one's life, but this was quickly forgotten with humans' short-memory spans. Now that I thought about it, there was plenty of opportunity for retaliation. Of course, this was all in hindsight, but I still couldn't let go of that thought.

As an animal photographer, I purposely brought along a high-end camera set on this vacation. In the end, everything was stolen.

Daaamn, how many tens of thousands did that camera cost? I couldn't help but feel furious.

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With nowhere to go, I suppressed my anger and contacted the police through the hotel. In the typical movie or TV drama fashion, I was forced to play the role of the “stereotypical Japanese victim”, which was in a way more depressing than the actual robbery itself.

And the police's reaction was outside of my expectations.

They only handed me the minimal documents necessary for applying for insurance. The accompanying hotel attendant who spoke a little Japanese informed me that the police wouldn't bother with these kinds of cases. Of course, if I was heavily injured or threatened with a gun, then this would be a completely different matter.

But that camera, the expensive camera I had scrimped and saved to buy- there was no way I was going to give that up so easily! Moreover, I didn't even have the money to afford the insurance.

Given how pissed off I was, there was no guarantee I wouldn't end up splitting the skull of the shopkeeper who sold this kind of trip as a product once I returned to Japan.

Even as I imagined executing the 'Shining Wizard' with my knee, I begged around desperately. Although the police were sympathetic, there was a feeling in the air that heinous crimes like murder took precedence over my case.

... And, the elderly police officer, who was flipping through the report again, surveyed the scene of the robbery and muttered something.

The translation of what he said went something along the lines of, **(!)**

"... Maybe there's a chance of recovering your camera... But it's not something I'd recommend."

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"*Iya iya*... What a terrible disaster.."

Appearing at the meeting point was a gentleman, still in his early years of his life.

A head of chestnut-colored hair and round glasses. This man looked just like the stereotypical banker. His extremely fluent Japanese had tricked me into thinking he was Japanese at first... but on closer inspection he looked completely different from a Japanese person.

Earlier, the middle-aged police officer rang some place, gave me the directions to the location and just told me 'Ask the man there for help. There'll be a translator'. The complicated expression on his face as he said this left the deepest impression of all.

"You're quite fortunate, aren't you?... That head of the investigative department who introduced us, Paul Noah- we've met quite a few times... If not for him, you'd be crying yourself to sleep."

To use a colloquial phrase like "crying yourself to sleep"- this man's grasp of Japanese must be quite extraordinary. And his pronunciation wasn't the slightest bit out of place... No, it should be said his speech has a more ancient flavor to it than the modern Japanese.

"I've heard about your problem... I'm afraid your belongings have been taken by Bobby and his crew... *Iya*, pranksters have been frequenting this area recently."

... This was on the same level as a prank?

In any case, there was something fishy about this man. He was probably some kind of detective, but for some reason I couldn't read him at all and the aura he gave off felt somewhat different from the usual person.

But screw that, even just finding someone I could communicate with was extremely reassuring.

... This thought only lasted an instant.

"How does this sound? Your stolen belongings... in exchange for a tenth of its value, I'll have a little 'negotiation' with them and you'll get back your camera?"

... I see, he was probably the boss of the robbers' group. Not only would he get a tenth of the profit, he avoided unnecessary fuss as well as eliminating the need to exchange the stolen items for money.

Well, still, a cut of a tenth of the value was an extremely good offer. Thinking this, I agreed without letting my guard down in front of that man.

"OK, deal."

The man told me that he would guide me to some place.

Were they planning to take my organs and sell them? Because of this anxiety churning in my stomach, I decided to scream '*herupu*' while escaping if the situation took a turn for the worse.

At any rate, killing to sell harvested organs could be described as 'flesh trade'.

Amidst all my musing over these useless matters, I was led to a bar at the corner of a larger street.

A beehive was drawn on the signboard, with a line of English letters written in the cells of the honey comb. Since I didn't know how to read English, I just called it the 'Beehive Store' for convenience's sake.

On entering into the store, I could smell the sweet scent of honey. The interior was larger than it looked from the outside. And though I said it was a bar, it wasn't unreasonable to think of it as a high-class restaurant.

I had no intention of stirring up trouble. Thinking this, I took a closer look at my surroundings. The unreadable man was definitely present, but when I saw there were also old people, children, and even couples, I relaxed.

That man walked into the depths of the store and said something to another man. The other man nodded silently and disappeared at the back of shop without taking anything with him.

"Aah, I told him about the situation... Just now, I was asking him to retrieve the item. *Iya*, we've seen those youngsters around... so I think we'll find them very soon."

He and the robbers were clearly together on this and yet he kept his façade of innocence. But of course I didn't say it out loud.

"*Maa*, since we're waiting anyway why don't we chat a little."

Even if he said something like that, I had no clue what we should chat about. Whatever, I'd just ask why his Japanese is so good.

"Aah... one of the top people in the organization is Japanese... He's called Yaguroma-*san*, but y'know, he taught me many things. *Maa*, I learnt the modern speech and tone from movies and Japanese comics."

Organization? So it was some Mafia-type organization after all. At this point, it no longer mattered whether they were Mafia or anything, I asked him directly about it.

“No... we're not Mafia. Although generally we're regarded as the same type of organization... we're actually 'Camorra'. Do you know what it is?”

I have never heard of this word before.

“Organizations from Sicily, in Italy, are 'Mafia'... originally they were the armed police forces of rural villages... but you can say they used to be the self-defense troops. But although we 'Camorra' also originate from Italy, we're from Naples. I suppose one could say our organization was formed in prisons, but I'm not very clear on the details myself.”

So they originated from prisons? Just this fact made this ' Camorra' sound worse than 'Mafia', but I kept these kinds of thoughts to myself.

“My role in our group is the ‘*conta è oro*’, the bookkeeper. *Maa*, a bit like those who control the group's finances... In the Mafia it's the accountants who are in charge.”

From my point of view, both sides looked pretty much the same .

“Haha... *Maa*, nowadays people always call us 'Mafia'. Mafia drug dealers, Chinese Mafia, Russian Mafia, Mafia smugglers... However, the 'Camorra' are powerful in Naples. But we were born

in America, so you can say we're 'orphans' with no direct connection to Naples."

Although he had revealed a lot of information about the inner workings of these organizations, I could understand only a small portion of what he was talking about. I never had any dealings with any violent organizations in Japan. In my eyes, these ' Camorra' and 'Mafia'... In any case, these people who live in the dark side of society didn't feel real to me.

"That's only natural. Even amongst people living in New York, those who come into contact with gangs make up less than even 1% of the population. Of course, this includes those who are directly hurt by gangs. I'm quite a nosy person myself, so there are times when I introduce myself to people like you. However, the number of people who are even able to meet me is but a fraction of that 1%."

... Truth was, I wanted to cry about just how bad my luck was.

But I'm already hooked by that man's conversational skills. How should I put it, it was like chatting to a friend I've known for many years, even though in reality we didn't even know each other's names.

"*Iya*... Actually, the count should be higher. It's just that the people who're aware of the existence of Mafia rarely speak of these matters..."

This was the stuff of movies. It was true the Mafia observed the 'Omertá', while ordinary citizens probably pretended they didn't see anything for fear of revenge.

But... Having said that, how then did one explain this person, who was telling someone he had just met about these organizations?

“Haha! *Maa*, I don't know about other organizations, but here we're not so uptight about things. And we don't do such monstrous deeds like revenge. ...Among the Sicilian Mafia, members are forbidden to say anything about being part of their organization. Camorra... once were like the American Mafia... but now, we members will all come out straight and say our own organization's name... and even the Boss himself will accept media interviews.”

So you guys like showing off? At my question, there was a moment of silence, then he exploded into peals of laughter.

After laughing for a while, he gazed at me with considerable interest and remarked,

“... You. You actually dared to say that in front of me, a Camorra, huh... Aren't you scared?”

Absolutely not.

“... Or perhaps you doubt I'm a gangster?”

Absolutely not. Even if you were lying, there was no special need to trick me with the Camorra.

"... You're a strange one... When I heard about you from that guy, Paul, I thought you were the stereotypical gullible Japanese."

How kind of you. And given how fluent your Japanese has been so far, you should be aware the proper way of addressing one's elders is '*-san*'. Like Paul-*san*, for example. Even if the age hierarchy is less prominent in America, as the younger person, you should at least show some respect, right? ... Although this was what I learned from the guidebook.

With this one sentence, the gears of my life went crazy, like a switch had been flipped. In that instant, it changed beyond my wildest imaginations.

This time the silence dragged on much longer, then he chortled as he said to himself,

"What a coincidence... Hm... Isn't it interesting..."

What was he talking about? While I was confused, he gave an impish grin, like a child finding a new plaything... or as though he was about to pull a prank- that was the kind of smile he directed at me.

And, after showing a somewhat perplexed expression, as though he was struggling with how to phrase something, he whispered to me,

"Paul is... younger than me."

Ah... huh? Wait a minute, what did he just say? That cop just now, no matter how you looked at him, was already past his prime ... Did that cop have such an aged face?

"He does, doesn't he... Back to what we were talking about... Over the past 60 years, there've been at most a hundred people to whom I've introduced myself as a Camorra. Of course this excludes the people who already know me and the police... That was how it was originally. Come to think of it, without a fateful meeting like this, I would have never had the opportunity to get to know a proper tourist like you. Haha!"

For a moment, I thought I had heard wrongly. 60 years. This youth in front of me...? Although I wasn't sure how to gauge a white person's age by just his features, this youth before my eyes simply couldn't be even halfway to 60 years old!

Seeing my unbelieving expression, he adjusted his glasses while saying the following embarrassedly.

"*Iya*, I'm an immortal. I can't die."

Hoooo, so this guy liked cracking American jokes?

"Ah, you don't believe me, do you. But it's true, whether I'm cut or burned, I won't die."

Sticking to the story stubbornly was a special characteristic of American jokes.

Hearing me make polite sounds of comprehension, he smiled sweetly and—

-pulled out a small knife from his breast pocket and stabbed his hand.

In that split second, I didn't fully comprehend what had happened. Where the knife protruded from the man's hand, crimson blood started to trickle out. Seeing me in the state of astonishment, he smiled as he said,

“It's all right... See?”

He slowly pulled out the knife. I thought fresh blood would fountain out but the flow of blood stopped completely.

At this point, I saw something that completely blew my mind away.

The man's blood that had spilt onto the table... it started wriggling like a sentient organism. As though wanting to return to its owner's body, it was sucked back into his wound. When all the blood had returned, the man's wound automatically disappeared without a trace. There wasn't the single bloodstain left on the table.

If this had occurred on the screen of a theater, I would have laughed it off as cheesy special effects. But unfortunately, this was happening right before my eyes.

Be it the gravity-defying movement of the fluid or the instantaneous healing, one couldn't help but feel the cliché looked prettier in CG. But this only added to the surreality of the situation .

The supernatural event that had occurred in this store... no, in this world- it couldn't possibly be just me who was aware of them? In this bar with a somewhat classic feel, a man had just performed a feat that warped the law of physics. Yet not a single worker or customer cast a look in this direction.

After thinking for a while, I spoke. Sitting in front of me... what kind of person was this?

Would he kill me?

For a moment, the man looked a bit dazed, then he once again grinned at me.

“This is the first time I've seen this kind of reaction... until now, those who've seen this, if they're not pulling out crosses they're pointing guns at me but... Ah, of course, the latter have all been taken away by the police. *Iya iya*, I really pity them. Then again, just the sight of me pulling out of my knife has scared away quite a few people.”

That's only natural.

“... Why would I kill you?”

Because I think you're a monster. I replied honestly. I felt bad for speaking of him as a monster, but, at the same time, I wanted to warn him against frightening people out of their wits with this real trick ever again.

"... You're a rare one. You're the first to react so calmly."

People said that I only looked calm or that I was insensitive. Regardless of what others said, ever since I was almost eaten by black bear in Hokkaido, my feelings of shock and fear have been somewhat lacking. Someone once suggested that I become a war photographer, but since I knew nothing about surviving on battlefields I would definitely die. And since I had no reason to die , I stuck to being an animal photographer.

Upon hearing my words, that man looked at me, his eyes filled with glee. **(!)**

"You truly are a very interesting person. I know, since it's a hard opportunity to come by, would you like to listen to a legend of mine? A story about the time I gained this power of immortality , and various other related stories... It's a great way of passing time , don't you think?"

It's a very interesting topic indeed... But is it all right for someone you've met for the first time to hear all this?

"No problem. Besides, even if you told other people no one would believe you."

I pressed to make sure he wasn't related to any religion. How could I still be so calm with an immortal before my eyes? To think of it only now, I must be really slow.

"A-aa, don't worry. I'm really not related in any way to that kind of stuff. I just want to kill some time, that's all. ... *Maa*, but this story does have a 'demon'."

This man, a self-proclaimed '*conta è oro*' of the Camorra, who at the same time seemed to be an immortal. After ordering some food from the waitress, he slowly started the 'legend'.

"... Well then, let's begin... A man who, through drinking the demon's wine, became immortal. This is the lonely, lonely story of this sorry man. The setting is the Prohibition-era New York. The story of the countless fates surrounding the sudden appearance of the 'wine of immortality', and the spiral of the people involved....."

Prologue

Year 1711 On the Atlantic Ocean Aboard a passenger ship called Advena Avis---

Alchemy.

Knowledge and techniques originating from Ancient Egypt and , at the same time, a culture.

Starting as an Egyptian art, it mixed in with Greek philosophy and hermetic tradition, then passed through Arabia and slowly seeped into Europe's Renaissance.

Pursuit of this art is to turn cheap metals into gold, or to create life without the help of God's hand. But the ultimate goal is to gain eternal life... No, even this doesn't count as the "ultimate". What alchemists seek is limitless. They would bury themselves in research to the end of their days in the all important task of turning the impossible possible. But if this were to pass, it would become "possible", and the ultimate goal would fade away. Until then they are likely to continue pursuing the impossible, drowning themselves in hope and knowledge, or another way of putting it- lose themselves in the mission.

Times change constantly. In the chaos of the real world, alchemists could deeply appreciate the qualities needed by a hero- at times they were hindered by obstacles on all sides, and other times they were the target of others' envy; all the while they had to push the boundaries of their art. But this kind of work was not

fruitless... the alchemist Newton discovered gravity. Modern day scientists make all kinds of contributions to society. Alchemy is definitely not a fake academia.

But sometimes---- alchemy is called magic or divine skill, and there were also some who tried to blur the distinction between alchemy and science, wanting to merge the two into one entity.

Generally, it's easy for ordinary people to mix alchemy and magic together, but in reality the two are completely different things. Among alchemists, there are those who snort at "external powers that cannot be explained by science", which rely on magic and prayers as a medium... but of course there are others who dabble as an experiment.

Whether it be magic or demonic arts, if its existence can be confirmed then it is also possible to transform it into the "possible" - it's just a question of opening that "impossible" toolkit.

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This passenger ship was cloaked by the darkness of night.

In the darkness... they listened only to the "voice".

They were alchemists, far away from home, seeking uncharted lands.

They were the ones who finally succeeded in summoning the ' demon' into the human realm, aboard this passenger ship.

"Did you call me a 'demon'? Ah, it's all right. But have any of you have seen God or angels? A word such as 'evil' only exists from the contrast of comparison for the first time. Ah, never mind; 103 years have passed since I have been specially summoned. It would have been wonderful if this happened 3 years earlier, but ... well, no matter. Ah, ' well, no matter' is my pet phrase. Don't pay it too much mind... I am directly transmitting my voice into your brains, so this thing about pet phrases is a little strange. Well, no matter."

This super long-winded 'demon' kept his pledge, and agreed to a contract of passing down the "forbidden knowledge" to the alchemists who were directly responsible for summoning him.

Alchemists said the following: "We want to learn everything about immortality."

"This request... does it not suggest that you secretly wish you were immortal? Well, no matter."

On the ship's deck... a utensil brimming with liquid was placed in the middle of the group of alchemists.

"You only have to drink this to become immortal. Everything that happens afterwards is up to you all to decide. I may be immortal, but my thoughts on this are completely different from yours... Wait, wait, calm down and listen well... I am generous, so this elixir is more than enough

for all the present members. Stop squabbling. .....Now then, if you ever tire of immortality and truly desire death..."

The 'demon' started teaching the alchemists how immortals can die.

"... You need to find others who have also drunk the elixir of immortality. After being found by one such fellow, place your own hand on the head of the one who wishes to die and think 'I want to eat'. Well, wishing hard for it is enough. This way, the fellow who seeks death will be sucked into your right hand and their life will end. This 'eating' is just a way to receiving all knowledge and abilities from the other party. The last one left will have accumulated all the knowledge and experiences of the thirty-odd people in here... If that last person too tires of immortality then summon me again. At that time, I will 'eat' them. Then I will obtain the knowledge of 30 people... Then, a word of warning... there are risks. ... Those who have drunk this elixir will lose the ability to use 'false names'. It will be a mental constraint... If it's just giving a temporary introduction to ordinary people, then there is no problem. But you will use your real name when conversing with fellow immortals, and your body will reject establishing a false identity in this world. ...If I don't do this, you will never be able to find each other..."

The alchemists mulled over it a little, then everyone shared the elixir of immortality between them and drunk it. The elixir had the scent of alcohol.

"Hm, that's right... We still have the contract of teaching everyone... Though I'm not sure what you mean by everything, in any case, I will teach you the recipe for the elixir just now. But I won't tell everyone here,

but only the alchemist who summoned me. If the others want to know then ask him afterwards."

Once the formless 'demon' said that, he gave the 'Knowledge' to the alchemist who summoned him. The youth didn't know what had happened. But he understood the 'Knowledge' he didn't know had just been implanted into his memory.

The demon's voice faded until it could no longer be heard.

The man who received the 'Knowledge' spent the entire night thinking.

He decided to tell the secret of immortality to his younger brother, who was also aboard the ship. He had reached only halfway when a sudden thought occurred to him.

And the next day, he declared:

"... I plan to seal this knowledge forever."

Although all the alchemists objected to this proposal, his decision was final.

And that very night, it happened.

The man with the knowledge stayed. In the middle of the night, he sensed someone's presence and opened his eyes.....
Standing at the center of the room was one of his friends.

The friend's hand was placed on the head of his brother, Gretto **(!)**, who was sleeping opposite him...

In just this instant he was already fully awake but it was too late . His own brother was, his friend... No, it was in that moment, like magic, his own brother was sucked into his comrade's right hand.

"*... Can't be, I didn't expect it to happen so quickly.*"

While watching to the scene, the 'demon' muttered alone, somewhere in the darkness.

"*I was the one who fanned the flames but... this is why humans are a greedy race. Watching this is enjoyable but...*"

The existence labeled as the 'demon' continued in a slightly melancholy voice,

"*This time, definitely, it'll happen.*"

The voice of the 'demon' couldn't be heard anymore. What was left was nothing but dark emptiness, as though the demon had never been there.

And thus, time flowed on.

Day 1

Year 1930 November New York

The lapis lazuli sky could be described as 'crystal-clear'. The bright morning sun shone down on the entire city.

The red and yellow brick buildings were like colors painted onto the streets. However, they never imparted a feeling of confinement to those walking on the streets.

On the other hand, the cars, which were growing in popularity in recent years, added to pedestrians' sense of claustrophobia.

It was the era of the Prohibition. Although every period developed its own fashions and trends, this country had to choose an "alcohol-free society".

But the end result was to raise the allure of alcohol, and even people who had never drank alcohol started to enter the black market for it... That is to say, the introduction of the new law had the ironic effect of increasing the number of 'criminals'.

Grape juice would be put before the door of general stores, and a sign would be placed in front of the barrel of grape juice. On the sign, the following warning would be written:

"This will ferment into wine if left out for too long. Please use before it goes bad."

This “grape juice” sold like hotcakes. In short, this was the kind of era it was.

The golden era of the Jazz Age was past, and only last year America was struck by the Great Depression. Even the streets packed with red-roofed houses seemed to have lost their vivid color.

But lurking in darkness of streets were the ‘leading stars’ of the era, who fought off the Depression and maintained power. Commonly referred to as the ‘Mafia’, they had strong footholds in the trade of illicitly-produced alcohol.

That was to say, the government’s policy of ‘Prohibition’ actually provided the perfect breeding ground for these enemies of law.

As the bosses of Mafia, Al Capone and 'Lucky' Luciano together created countless ‘legends’— the 1930s was that kind of era.

Their legends always began in the back alleys.

“Charity, charity please!”

The emergency exit of a bank, the space between densely-packed apartments, the garbage area at the back of restaurants... Simply put, as long as it was a narrow, dark alleyway , anywhere was OK. It had nothing to do the volume of pedestrian traffic. And of course, the seasons or time of day didn’t matter too.

"You just have to donate a little of your spare change to save this poor man's life."

From behind a hat shop came the beggar's plea. And everything began from this, from the sound in the alleyway.

Every time someone passed through the alley, the shabby middle-aged man would chase them, fervently begging "charity please". When the passers-by reached the exit to the main street, he would give up and return to his original position... to repeat the same routine over and over again.

"The Lord is always watching over you, and your charity will be rewarded by the Lord..."

"I want to ask--"

This cycle of repetitive begging was cut off abruptly.

The one speaking to the beggar was a man... or perhaps it would be better to describe him as a 'youngster'. He halted his skipping steps and tilted his head back to look at the heavily-bearded beggar.

"Why is it you use the name of God so lightly when begging?"

The youngster's tone and manner did not match his youthful appearance. The beggar's face clouded over with confusion at the sudden question.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you a devout Christian? Have you ever attended a Sunday mass? Before you became unemployed, had you ever donated to the church? Can you tell me the difference between Catholics and Protestants? If you can say 'yes' to all the above, then you shouldn' t be using God's name to beg in such a place. Right now you should be helping the sisters at church with charity work, or searching hard for a job to feed your family. If not, then you should hate the Lord for leaving you where you are now and become a Satanist."

The beggar, pressured into silence by the youngster's tone of voice and his relentless questioning, responded by shouting the moment the youngster stopped for breath.

"As if! Then what happened to the donations to the church? Those bastards at the top only worship the Lord only in name, when in reality they're enjoying the thousands and billions of ' donations' that should belong to us, the poor!"

"You've never cared about anyone but yourself, have you...? Of course God will abandon guys like you who only think about themselves. The majority of people are on the streets because of the Depression. But if that's the case, those standing on the streets holding large protest signs saying "We want work" are more deserving of life than you are."

The beggar wanted to retort but couldn't think of anything better to say. And still the youngster rambled on about his own philosophy, heedless of the beggar.

"But come to think of it, being a beggar requires skill. Among those who beg as a way of living, there are guys who still beg at crossroads in rags, even if they have money. Then there are some who break their own arms and teeth to 'play the role'. Those beggars attract more pity than those truly in need. Compared to them, you are still an amateur."

Having said all that, the youngster rolled his eyes and pulled out his leather wallet from his breast pocket.

"Huh?"

The beggar was baffled. From his words from just now, it didn't seem likely he would be receiving alms from him. So why was the youngster taking out his wallet?

"—If it was the usual me, I wouldn't care about a beggar as unprofessional as you are..."

A number of coins were taken from the wallet. But the beggar's eyes were drawn to the thick wad of bills in the wallet. At a time of depression like this, it shouldn't be possible for so much money to be in the hands of such a youngster. No, even an employed adult wouldn't have this much money... The wad of bills compressed as the wallet closed.

"Today's a very memorable day for me, so I'm in a very good mood. You're lucky to meet me today, now take this money."

A few moments passed; the beggar's face became gleeful by degrees.

"Ooh, ooooh, thank you so much, young sir! I will never forget your kindness for the rest of my life."

"Nah... it's all right to forget it so just accept it."

The youngster urged the beggar to take those few coins from his open palm.

"Aaah, the Lord will definitely bless you with good fortune."

"Like I said, you're just lucky I'm in a good mood, so stop treating me like some saint..."

"Aah, yes! I have some flowers which were freshly picked this morning. As thanks for your kindness, I'll give them to you. Please accept them."

Speaking quickly, the beggar still did not take the money but instead started rummaging in the filthy bag he was holding.

"They're probably withered by now."

"No, no, the Lord will ensure that they will blossom because of your generosity."

A happy expression still twisting his face, the beggar inspected the contents of the bag. Then...

"What a big red, red flower...!"

It was destroyed in an instant.

The pitiful paper bag tore a little, then was violently ripped apart.

From the tattered remains of the bag emerged a gleaming 'boy' knife.

"-------!"

The bearded beggar seemed to be squawking something. But he seemed very, very delighted.

Just as the excited, strange sounds stopped...

...it morphed into an agonized and startled cry.

"----G-gaaaaaa g-ga g- gua.....aa!"

Just before the tip of the blade touched his abdomen, the youngster grabbed the wrist of the hand brandishing the knife. At the same time, he lightly swayed to one side. The knife sliced air as it passed under his arm. In the blink of the eye, the youngster grabbed both hands of the beggar and mercilessly twisted them to the beggar's back.

All this happened in less than the time than it took for the beggar's strange shout to turn into a wretched cry.

"Down you go."

The youngster pushed him back, slowly applying his body weight.

There was the sound of a knife hitting the floor, but the youngster didn't seem to care in the slightest.

Some kind of creaking sound could be heard clearly, coming from the beggar's wrist.

But even this sound was drowned by the beggar's miserable cry .

"Arg.... Aaaaaaa-aa g-ga u-uua s-stostostostostosto- s-sto- s-stop iiiiiit!"

When he was certain the beggar was writhing in agony, the youngster viciously shoved the beggar into the shade of the red-bricked wall. The beggar immediately fell to his knees with a heavy thud. There, he slowly crumpled to the ground and rolled around, groaning.

After a glance at the state of the beggar, he bent down to pick up coins that had fallen because of the short scuffle.

Then, when he was sure the beggar had stopped moving,

"Hey... get up."

The youngster firmly grasped the beggar's wrist and hauled up this man who was double his size. Then he propped him up against the red-bricked wall.

"Crossing someone as faithless as me was a very big mistake... Sorry, but I'm not so nice as to let you quietly stab me to death."

The beggar rested his shoulder against the wall and silently listened to the youngster's mockery; meanwhile his eyes darted around rapidly. He was thinking about how he could escape from this kind of situation.

"Want to escape? You're really hasty."

The youngster placed the coins he picked up into the center of his own palm and held them before the beggar.

"Didn't I say so before? Think of it as your good fortune..."

As the youngster spoke, he clenched his fist tightly around the coins on his palm.

"... Accept this gratefully with your whole heart."

This time, he didn't raise his fist as high, but the punch that followed was powerful enough to knock out the beggar's front teeth.

"~~~~~~~~!"

Hit by the youngster, the back of the beggar's head slammed hard against the wall. This, together with the pain in his front teeth , caused the beggar to let out a wail------- which faded... and, his back scraped down the wall... and he sprawled unceremoniously onto the floor.

This time the beggar completely lost consciousness, and so he didn't thrash around like before.

The youngster slowly loosened his clenched fist. The coins fell one by one, showering onto the man's face covered by blood from his nose and mouth. By chance, a few dropped into the beggar's open mouth. Some coins that had struck the ground made crisp, metallic sounds, filling the alleyway with the feel of decay.

"... hm?"

The youngster looked at his surroundings closer, and saw that not too far away was that knife. It looked common; it was just something without much value.

Should I dump it in the river...?

The youngster bent down again briefly to ensure the beggar had already passed out. But after thinking it over, the youngster decided take the knife to be on the safe side.

Just as the youngster was about to reach out to take the gleaming knife, someone called his name.

"Firo Prochainezo. Don't move your hand."

The hand, almost about to touch the knife, stopped in mid-air, and the youngster----- Firo Prochainezo looked in the direction where the voice came from... towards exit of the alley... where light spilled in from the avenue.

Standing in the back light was a silhouette of a young man. The young man in his early to mid-twenties was wearing a brown suit, and on top of that a knee-length black coat.

"You're such a pain... quit touching the evidence as you like..."

This young man gave Firo a look of disgust while donning a white glove and slowly lifting up the knife.

"Edward... What's this about?"

"That should be 'Mr. Edward', right? Learn to address those above you as 'Mr.' or 'Ms.'..... boy. Of course, you can also call me 'Inspector Edward'."

This man wearing the black coat... Edward Noah, Inspector of the police force. The corners of his mouth turned up in a faint, arrogant smile as he silently lifted his right hand.

Then, a large number of men appeared from behind him... The broken bag, the scattered coins, the unconscious idiot- they began ' collecting' everything one by one. As for Firo, he was ignored completely. All of them, taller than Firo by a head, literally acted as though "nothing was there".

"Oy oy, guys, take care you don't run over that brat."

Pretending they didn't hear their superior's boring joke, the men continued their work in silence.

"... Hmph, what a boring lot."

"Let's get this straight, Ed-... *Mister Edward*. Do you take me for some idiot?"

Firo, who had remained silent up to this point, opened his mouth and asked quietly.

The majority of items had been taken away, and those hard-working men were nowhere to be seen. The only evidence of the earlier incident was just small bloodstains left by that beggar.

Edward responded to Firo's question without even glancing at him, let alone turning his face to answer.

"You're right, you can't possibly be an idiot. Just some trash, a tick crawling on the streets."

"Stop evading the question..."

Displeasure started to color Firo's words. A hint of a derisive smile crept over Edward's face as he lit a rolled cigarette and lazily leaned against the red-bricked wall.

"Ahh, don't make such a scary face... It's just that the man you *knocked out* just now... he's a criminal we've been watching for a while."

"What?"

"He's a murderer. Using tactics like he did against you- he pretended to be a beggar in a small alleyway and targeted kind

gentlemen and gentle ladies... If he saw enough cash worth the risk when looking into people's wallets, he'd use the knife hidden in a paper bag and attack! ... Just like that. Although we only learned about the bag just now."

"Why'd you leave something like this alone?"

"Even with witnesses' testimonies, that isn't enough to prove he 's guilty. So in the end we had to quickly use some officers as bait to catch him in the act."

Edward drew deeply from the cigarette.

"So you had me appear here."

"Well yeah. Speaking frankly, if it was anyone other than you, we would let them pass and ensure their safety."

"... You were planning to watch only from the sidelines from the very beginning, weren't you? Your hobbies sure are honorable. So watching the instant of life-or-death is like watching boxing match? ... It would be even better if those guys had popcorn, yeah? "

"That's exactly why we're overlooking your excessive self-defense."

"... My tears of gratitude won't stop flowing."

"Nonetheless, I personally still think it's better if you'd been stabbed to death. ... I don't quite see how you were able to dodge it ."

"If you see a beggar in such a desolate place, of course you'll be wary. And that blatantly fishy bag... Thankfully it wasn't a gun in there."

"Oh? So you'd have been fine if we left you alone?"

Edward asked this as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"That's exactly my sentiments today. If by chance it was just some beggar, then you'd let me give money to that guy... Say, why charge in like that?"

"Didn't I say so before? The criminal doesn't target anyone other than folks with wallets stuffed with money. So that's why he only attacks if the money covers the risk of killing and running in broad daylight. That's why he couldn't believe some kid under twenty has so much money, right?"

It was clear Edward knew full well he was mocking Firo.

"... Are you planning to investigate whether I'm evading taxes or stealing?"

Firo's eyes started glittering sharply.

"Ha! You're joking! As if it's necessary take such a roundabout way to investigate some small fry like you! Even if you were the head of your organization, it's so weak and small you'd just end

up swallowed up by other organizations around you! It's survived until this day because you're so low on the food chain that no one thinks you guys are even worth the time and effort!"

"—I'll take what you just said as an insult."

Firo said just this one sentence shortly.

Just as the boy was thinking about how to beat up this bastard, his name was called again. But in contrast to Edward's tone, it was gentle and pleasant.

"So you were here, Firo."

Exactly where Edward had appeared- there, at the intersection with the main street- stood a tall gentleman wearing glasses. Bathed in the light from the main street, his chestnut hair flashed gold. On first glance, this man looked almost the same age as Edward, but this man had a mysterious air that made it impossible to guess his age.

"Didn't we say to meet in the hat store? I was worried because you didn't come, then I heard your voice coming from outside."

A smile of surprised delight appeared on the man's face.

But the moment he saw that smiling face, Edward's rather arrogant smile was wiped away.

"You're..."

"Mr. Maiza! Ah... sorry, I got into a spot of trouble..."

Firo's attitude was completely different from when he was speaking to the inspector. He hastily fixed his collar and even straightened his back from the slouch it had been in all along.

On the other hand, Edward was grinding the cigarette butt against the wall with a dour expression.

"Maiza Avaro... My, my, I never thought I'd meet the '*conta è oro*' of the Martillo Family in such a place..."

Unlike Edward, whose voice had an undercurrent of nervousness, Maiza greeted him in response with a blank smile.

"Um-... Aah, you must be the Inspector Edward. You seem to be in a good mood today."

Although this extremely sarcastic greeting was directed at a man who was clearly in a foul mood, the smile on his face kept Edward from feeling the sting in his words.

"... Hmph... As expected, you're better than that boy. At least you know how to greet others properly."

"No, not at all. This may be the last time we will be able to address you as 'Inspector'."

"...?"

"Starting from next week, you will be 'Special Agent' Edward, am I right?"

Hearing these words, Edward's eyes widened in astonishment and his mouth opened and closed soundlessly several times before he could answer.

"What... did you say?"

"Oh my, is my news wrong? Well, it is just a rumor going around the streets."

Edward glared. It was true that he was about to start fieldwork with the Bureau of Investigation next week (renamed five years later as the Federal Bureau of Investigation... the FBI). He hadn't even told his lover or colleagues. Then how... how did some stranger who was least likely to know about this get hold of the information?

The young inspector vowed to find the source of the information leak, while directing all his irritation at Firo with a disgruntled look.

"...At the very least, Firo, hear me out on this. No matter who you give alms to now, it'll still be seen as hypocrisy. Quit this kind of pointless stuff and disappear from this city, unless you've decided you're ready for prison."

Firo was a little taken aback by the sudden lecture, but a moment later he replied irritably,

"You know what? I'm my own boss, and those who accept my charity are all the same to me. Whose business is it whether I'm a hypocrite or not?"

"You think everyone's happy getting your hard-earned dirty money?"

"... So you're saying donating to public funds or charity organizations is a better system, aren't you. No one checks who's donating or what kind of money it is."

Firo didn't deny the accusation of 'dirty money'.

"But then, I don't normally make donations."

"That again... Haven't you learned anything today?"

Edward was asking this question when Maiza cut in.

"Firo, we need to hurry... May we, Inspector?"

"... Ah, yeah..."

"Ah... sorry, Mr. Maiza. I've made you wait."

As the young inspector watched the backs of the two departing people, he thought:

A capable youngster in the organization together with one of the senior executives. What a special day.

As though a sudden thought occurred to him, Edward shouted to the youngster's back,

"Firo, you can't possibly..."

Firo's footsteps stopped. His back was facing him... he still faced the street.

"... It can't be... the executive?... You're being promoted? You, a mere *picciotto* ?"

Edward wrinkled his brow as he asked suspiciously.

He had also lived in this city for a long time. Firo was a very talented member of the 'organization'- this Edward acknowledged - but he seemed too young to be promoted to become an executive. He was still one and a half years from twenty years of age, and just his appearance made him look like a 'youngster' 3-4 years younger than his actual age. At such a tender age in the other side of society ... No, even in normal society, he wouldn't even be considered a candidate for one of the executive seats in any organization.

But Edward had heard that there were special ceremonies for becoming an executive. They would meet up with a senior executive they didn't normally see inside the hat shop... The " special day": on this day, the promoted person must go to a hat or clothing store. Edward knew all too well that he couldn't do anything despite knowing the rules of the organization, but he was at least able to distinguish the executives within the organization.

"Hey... Is it really true?"

Firo didn't reply, but neither did he confirm or deny it. Silently, he resumed walking.

Edward took this response as a silent yes. He exploded with the kind of laughter one gave when hearing ghost stories, then, as though he had to confirm something, spoke again,

"It's true? You're really becoming an executive? *You* are? A baby-face like you? You gotta be kidding! Hey, hey ... Hurry up and give me some sort of response, this isn't something to joke about. Then, I dunno, is your organization really this short of people?"

The two people ignored him as they departed. Edward had expected this, and smiled as he said,

"It's because you've got a girly face, right... Just how many executives did you sleep with to rise so high?"

The two's footsteps quietly came to a halt.

Debating if he should scare him a little, Firo shifted his attention towards the dagger at his waist.

"Inspector."

But the first to turn was Maiza.

Beaming, Maiza said tonelessly to the inspector,

"We could take what you said as an insult."

Edward's smile stiffened, and even his derisive words froze on his tongue.

Maiza still had that harmless smile on his face, and his speech hadn't changed at all from before.

But the poor inspector could feel the killer intent pouring from him.

I'll be killed.

One more word about the 'organization' or Firo and he'd be killed by the man before his eyes. The iciness in his voice only served to confirm this.

If there was one thing that made him feel that way, it was the man's eyes. His eyes' depth seemed to hold something that was beyond his understanding... something that gave him the chills.

Edward snapped his jaw shut, feeling cold sweat breaking out all over his body. Maiza placed his hand on Firo's shoulder and continued,

"... Certainly, we may be an organization that will just be *swallowed up*..."

A moment of silence passed.

"But it'd be best if you don't offer us false pity ..."

So the damn bastard was eavesdropping on us after all.

Edward thought that, but didn't have the guts to stay it aloud. He could feel the sweat slowly trickling down his back.

Giving the scowling Firo two pats to the shoulder, Maiza set off towards the main street as though nothing had happened. As though drawn along, Firo also headed to the main street.

"... Remember this... Mark my words... Even if you killed me, I still won't accept the existence of Mafia like you... Because one day ... I'll get rid of you all... For sure!"

From behind the two came the ragged voice of the inspector, who sounded like he had finally managed to force the words past his constricted throat.

"Ah- We are not 'Mafia'."

Without even looking back, Maiza gave a light wave of his hand as he answered.

Firo continued with one more line, then the two disappeared into the hustle and bustle of the streets.

"We are------— 'Camorra'."

In the alleyway Maiza and Firo just left, the inspector's fists shook violently.

"Um... Inspector, we should return to the station."

One of the police officers who had been collecting evidence earlier walked over.

"... Where did you go just now?"

"Ah... Er... We were all waiting in the car for you. But you never came, so..."

"Bullshit! You were so scared of that *conta è oro*, you didn't dare come over just now!"

"Of-, of course not..."

The officer's face turned pale, proof that the inspector's words had hit the mark.

"You call yourselves the police? What's our duty? It's to protect the nation's laws and safety of the people! What'd happen if we get scared when threatened by those two guys?"

Edward kicked the wall over and over again with his new leather shoes.

These words were directed at himself as much as at the policeman. This only infuriated Edward more.

"Maiza Avara... Firo Prochainezo... I've never been able to stand you guys. I'll definitely destroy you with these own hands someday!"

To calm down the angered inspector, the idiotic policeman pitched in with an inappropriate joke.

"Those lines sound just like something out of Mafia novels."

Edward swung his ruined shoe mercilessly at his companion's shin.

"He said he'll get rid of us."

"Oh my, how scary, how scary. These types of people are really bull-headed. Ah well, it's precisely because the police are so bull-headed that they are worth trusting."

Firo and Maiza exchanged looks then smiled faintly.

"What'll the world come to if we trust the police?"

The two people, who emerged from the alleyway, passed between Little Italy and Chinatown and headed towards the Manhattan Bridge. They had met at that shop to buy a hat, but after the 'messing about' just now, they decided to go to another store.

"Since we've already here, I know a good shop nearby."

Because of Maiza's one sentence, the two had to walk for more than an hour.

"Musicals are quite something... The 'Good Witch' in the Wizard of Oz, what was her everyday life like?"

This Maiza person was really a man who was 'not the slightest bit like a Camorra'.

Never quarreling, never getting angry, always smiling and speaking courteously to everyone, he didn't seem to possess any of the necessary qualities of an inhabitant of the underworld. If one met him on the streets, it'd feel like he was hiding his true self from the world while issuing orders to his organization's meetings and underlings.

When comparing the Camorra and the Mafia, people generally thought 'the Camorra are more violent'. But Maiza seemed completely oblivious to this disreputable side of the Cammora.

Maiza had served the longest in the organization as someone in charge of paperwork and sums, and was appointed the '*conta è oro*' , but even before he became part of the executive board he was well-known in the 'organization' for his strangeness. Or at least, that was what Firo always thought.

At the lower ranks of the organization, there were even some who scornfully called Maiza 'mental' or 'the gutless calculator'. Firo didn't dislike Maiza so he always tried to think of ways to protect him, but his behavior didn't lend much strength to his words.

"Aah, you should be able to see it better. That's the shop I'm somewhat acquainted with."

At the center of the road from which the Manhattan Bridge could be seen was a well-established hat shop.

When they entered the elderly shopkeeper only gave them a cursory glance; he didn't even bother with any sort of welcome. Even though it was a shop on a main street, there was nothing appealing about it. But when one saw the racks full of hats, one realized that, actually, this was quite a good shop. Although this shop specialized in hats and belts, Firo couldn't help but wow at the sheer richness of selection.

"Amazing..."

The wall was covered with hats that hung from it. No, rather, because the hats completely obscured the wall, it made one wonder: *was there really a wall behind the hats*? The hats didn't just cover the walls, but they also filled the shelves of the shop; belts were draped around the counter like wallpaper.

"It doesn't matter when you come, you'll always be surprised... I said that I'd choose a hat suitable for you, so... My apologies, it may take a while. Is that all right?"

"Of course. Take your time."

Maiza lightly nodded his head, then headed straight into the mountain of hats.

In a normal Camorra organization, when someone was promoted to become a 'Camorrista' executive they wouldn't know

about it until the night of the 'inauguration ceremony'. But the Camorra family Firo and Maiza belonged to had a different custom. The person in question would be notified a day in advance , and on the day of the 'ceremony', they would go together with a chosen executive to a hat store. Furthermore, that chosen executive would choose the most suitable hat for his colleague who would rise to the same rank that night.

But there wasn't any special meaning to this practice. It was just that Don Molsa Martillo gave every member a hat in the beginning , when establishing a family in New York, and it became a practice; that was all.

As such, Firo, who was about to become an executive, treated the hat selection as an important part of the 'ceremony', and so waited a little anxiously for his own hat.

However, when he saw Maiza and the hat, he completely forgot about the incident with the annoying inspector. Now Firo's heart was filled with the anticipation and nervousness about tonight's ceremony.

"This one isn't bad."

A hat was placed on Firo's head.

It was a pearl-green fedora. When shone on by the sunlight from the door, the soft, reflected glow was green. This matched the youngster's light complexion like a perfect work of art. When the

youngster spun around and the light couldn't reach the hat, the color instantly changed to a dark green... contrasting strongly with his pale face and making a lasting impression on the viewer.

"This is... fantastic, Mr. Maiza! It's perfect!"

The '*conta è oro*' knew his behavior was not exaggerated- the youngster was just very happy. The reflection in the shop mirror could easily be mistaken for another person. This made the youngster want to obtain another coat of a similar color. It was a little... No, it didn't matter even if this made him very eye-catching .

The youngster looking himself in the mirror gave a truly sincere , happy smile. This expression made it difficult to imagine that this was the very same person as the earlier youngster who had mocked the beggar and mercilessly punched him in his face.

The last time Maiza saw this expression was when the Don granted him permission to join the family.

When it was time for Maiza to pay the shopkeeper still hadn't say anything; he just silently put the hat into a bag and charged according to the price tag. Even when Maiza made some polite chitchat about the weather, the shopkeeper just wordlessly spared him one glance.

But these two didn't mind, chatting instead about what to do after the ceremony tonight, such as what was there to eat, getting a

bottle of wine from a "speakeasy" on the way back, and other similar topics, then walking out of the shop door.

At this moment, another man and woman entered.

The man seemed taller than Mazia, tall enough to almost touch the door frame. The woman on the other hand was a little shorter than Firo, wearing heavily bejeweled bracelets on both her wrists and quite a few silver rings on her fingers.

The clothing this pair wore was striking. The man wore a black tuxedo with no tie and held a black leather case. The woman wore a black one-piece dress, also of a similar style, with red leather belts around her waist and wrists. At the time it was rare to see women dressed in that manner, so it gave her a feel of the witch from a musical.

The most important thing was that a remarkable, two-person team had popped up in this terrible world.

"Oops, my apologies."

Because his shoulder hit them, Maiza apologized immediately.

"Hey, hey, be careful."

"Be careful!"

The woman following hot on the heels of the man parroted the same sentence.

There wasn't any more to the incident, but Firo stared at the duo who seemed like they were plucked straight from Broadway and thought,

These two people are both in their twenties... But in a recession like this, just which wealthy family did this young master and missus come from?

Firo pondered this as he stowed away his money safely and walked out of the store together with Maiza.

Within the store Firo and Maiza left, the man in the tuxedo, Isaac Dian, spoke quietly to the elegant woman beside him, Miria Harvent.

"Listen, Miria... I just wanted to say again, we mustn't do anything to stand out."

"Understood. Keep a low profile, if we keep a low profile then it 'll be okay, right?"

"That's right. If you understand then it's great."

Making chatter that was very fishy compared to their attire, the two surveyed the wall buried in hats. The man held a large travel suitcase in his left hand, but they didn't seem like they were going to travel.

"Amazing! Choose quickly."

"We can buy whatever we want!"

"Feels like you can conquer the entire world with just a hat."

As he sprouted these bewildering analogies, the strange man picked out a hat he liked and started spinning it on his finger, making whirling sounds.

"What kind of hat should I choose?"

Miria inquired.

"We—ell, it's better to choose a plainer one... No wait, better to choose a shocking one to confuse people?"

As the two ventured into the depths of the store, they found more and more varieties of hats.

It could be said every possible kind of hat was there. Even though it was winter, there were straw-woven hats, and also the feathered Indian headdress, and even the tall, cylindrical black hats of the British Royal Guard.

"... Is it really okay to sell this?"

Isaac held in his hand a helmet, which was part of the uniform of the New York police. While Miria had obtained an American military helmet, which, when she put on her own head, gave her the strange feeling of merging with it.

"Oh wow, this is really amazing."

An especially eye-catching hat sat on the highest shelf in the store. It was made out of cloth-wrapped metal, and was decorated with gold wires all over. And the part of the forehead area gleamed gold.

"What's this? Not a boomerang, right?"

"It can't be a dagger or something, right? Won't it hurt?"

They were actually talking about a hat decorated with something that looked like a v-shaped knife.

Below this eccentric hat was a slip of paper, on which "JAPAN" was written.

"Aaaaaa-h... Can it be the crown of Japan's king?"

"I must be. Otherwise why would it be so bright and shiny?"

In the shelf below this crown was the famous cloth mask of the Mysterious Thief, so it wasn't placed together with any of the other hats, strange or otherwise.

"... Isn't this a bit over the top?"

"Maybe it isn't suitable for us robbers."

Miria smiled at Isaac and accidentally said something shocking.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter, let's just buy it all."

Isaac wasn't phased by what Miria said. So in the end, Isaac went to the register holding a black top hat, a lady's lace hat, as well as the Japanese crown and the strange wooden mask picked only moments ago. *Clatter clatter*- an astonishing quantity of goods crashed down before the aged shopkeeper's eyes.

Even then the shopkeeper didn't say a word. He just scanned the goods with his eyes, then wrote down the individual prices of the goods and the total on a piece of paper.

On the piece of paper was an astounding number that was the equivalent of two month's wage of a bank worker. Isaac immediately took out a large amount of cash from the black briefcase, and casually handed it to the shopkeeper after a quick count.

A minute later, dozens of excess bills and the remaining change returned to Isaac's hand.

"Grandpa, forget everything about our visit to your shop! Okay ?"

"Forget it!"

A duo who were excessively talkative. Their dress and speech were also eccentric, so under certain circumstances others may very well have reported them to the police. But there just simply wasn't anything wrong with their appearance- they were just a little bizarre, that was all.

"If you should report to the police... we'll... we'll what?"

The self-confessed criminal turned to Miria, who was by his side, for help.

"Um--, how about giving him a beating? If we still haven't decided on what to do."

"I see. How's that, old man! If you dare report us to the police... we'll beat you up!"

"Beat you up!"

This was a terrible threat. In many ways.

Hearing duo's strange threat, the shopkeeper just shot them a look.

The man and woman immediately shut their mouths, picked their paid items from the register and quickly left the store.

The shopkeeper picked up the newspaper again, and after a while, completely forgot everything about the customers who had come in today.

"Huff huff huff... S-... S-s-s-s-sscaryyy."

"Scaryyy."

The two people who fled from the hat shop sprinted into a nearby alley.

"Damn... That old man must be quite strong. With just a look I... Just what- no- he almost made me wet my pants... u-um... finally we escaped... no... I suppose we were chased out by that old man... ???"

"We were chased out."

"Yeah, just like that... With one look of an eye he chased us out... But of course, if we were to fight with him we would definitely win. But you see, the opponent is also very powerful, so I couldn't allow the possibility of my Miria getting hurt."

"Really?" Miria asked happily.

"Yeah, of course! Ever since we started robbing a year ago, from San Francisco to New Jersey, we've robbed eighty-seven places. Just when have I ever exposed you to danger?"

"Eight-seven times?"

"..."

"..."

"You see! It's not even one hundred times yet!"

"It's true! Amazing!"

This awed exclamation was sincere. They were always like this- they had no sense of danger whatsoever, which meant they had encountered danger quite a few times without even knowing it.

"That's right! We're gonna do one big job in New York, then we 'll go to some place like Miami to enjoy leisurely days. This way the word danger will become a foreign word to us!"

"A foreign word to us!"

"We will buy a big house, then build a huge swimming pool, and swim there day and night."

"It gets cold at night."

"It's okay, we will use over ten stoves, so this way even the swimming pool will become warm."

"Over ten! That's so amazing- even the Arabian kings don't do this kind of stuff."

It's true that the desert at night was icy-cold... but still, the people who said these things seemed to have severe brain damage.

"And we can build a railroad in the garden. This way, we can take the train everyday from home to the gate."

"Uwah, but then the train tickets will be very expensive."

"Good point. Right, we won't have the railroad."

"But that's still very amazing. Can we really become such wealthy people?"

"Of course. Together with Miria I can even become the President of America! We are the Kings of America, the Kings! Aah , the king, the queen, or even a joker, we can become anything!"

A man becoming a queen was rather difficult to imagine in reality.

"Even though I don't really understand, it still sounds amazing! "

The two were immersed in their own fantasies, humming jazz tunes. This alleyway was like the duo's stage as they danced hand in hand. The lover pair dreamed about their future—

And then a car hit them.

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"—Did they die?"

From the back of the car came an old man's voice.

"No... although we were driving very quickly... Ah, they moved . Maybe they fell because they lost their balance."

The answer from the driver's seat was from a young woman's voice.

"Then let's hurry."

"Yes."

As if nothing had happened, the car picked up speed as it pulled out of the scene. Only when the car was about to drive onto the main street did that man in the back finally speak again.

"... Be careful. Why did you hit someone?"

"My apologies, I originally intended to avoid them, but they suddenly danced out into the center of the road... Braking then was already too late."

The man in the back was silent for a while. He was thinking the woman on the driver's seat had yet to lie to him until now.

"... Danced out?"

"Yes, the man was wearing a black suit and the woman black formal dress... almost like they were dancers rehearsing something ."

"... This place is rather far from Broadway."

"And... the man was still holding a hat in his right hand... a Japanese samurai helmet."

The man raised an eyebrow at that.

"... In recent times, the youngsters have been really hard to understand..."

There was no response from the driver's seat.

"Hm... Even long ago I couldn't understand the thoughts of those youngsters."

The man slowly closed his eyes as he talked to himself.

"That's right... From two hundred years ago... it started when that youngster lost his senses. I will never believe in young people again."

"... When compared to you, Master Quates, the whole world is younger."

The sound came from the driver's seat. Although he was interrupted, Szilard didn't seem displeased and answered.

"Of course, that's why I don't trust anyone."

After this, a deep silence descended on the car.

This large, black car driven by a woman stopped at the southern building of the Central Bus Station.

The Empire State building, which was expected to be finished next year, could be seen from their location. Although it wasn't complete, it already exuded a stately sense of prestige as it overlooked the entire street.

The female driver hurried to get off the car first, then opened the backseat door. The back of the car was very spacious- a rare model at the time.

Szilard Quates was in a bad mood as he descended from the car, deepening the folds on his already heavily-creased face. The rays from late autumn sun filtered through between the buildings, and shone directly onto the old man's face.

"... Blinding."

The female driver immediately opened an umbrella. Across the whole of the five meters between the car and the entrance of the building, she shaded the old man from the sun as she moved with him.

When they arrived at the door, the driver used her free hand to insert the key into the lock of the door. Szilard hadn't even looked at her from when the driver opened the door until now.

There was nothing inside the building, just the bare layout of the rooms. There wasn't a shred of life in the building. However, it wasn't abandoned either. There was no soot on the floor; the walls and lights were very new, as though renovations had only just been completed yesterday.

Szilard walked to the empty space by the side of the stairs, and tapped his foot a few times on the floor.

After some seconds, the light above the stairs lit up. Szilard tapped his foot again to confirm.

The floorboard in front of him lifted up, and from within emerged an old man's head.

"Well, well, isn't it Master Quates, it's been a while since we've last met!"

"It's only been twenty years. That's not really a long time."

"Hahaha... your perspective of time is different from ours."

"Time is always the same. It just differs in how it is perceived, that's all."

With this greeting, the two old men and the young woman walked down the stairs.

Szilard and this old man's footsteps were so light, it was difficult to believe they were both elderly people. Then, a group of people appeared in front of them.

"Ooh, Master Quates."

"It's great to see you in such good health."

"You look well..."

"Your existence is truly an amazing miracle to mankind."

The dozen or so men didn't seem at all surprised by the fact that Quates's appearance hadn't changed in the past twenty years.

The men's ages varied, but the youngest looked like they were already forty years old. In fact... there were even three men who looked like they were around ninety.

Szilard, surrounded by a group of old men, looked around, then said lazily,

"Looks like Barnes and Stagen aren't around."

The old men looked down. The man who guided Szilard reported sorrowfully,

"Master Barnes is currently in the 'distillation room'... Master Stagen... passed away last year."

"I see."

Szilard's voice didn't have any emotion.

"It can't be helped, dying of old age... if he had persisted for another year, then he would have been able to celebrate this day with us..."

Szilard asserted. The others didn't object.

They knew it was near impossible for themselves to die from accidents or illnesses.

"In the past, without the complete wine, I wasn't able to grant you immortal life... Although you won't die a sudden death, you can't help but fear aging to death. But that will end today."

There were some small cheers, which echoed around the underground room.

“... But, there appear to be some problems.”

In an instant, the cheering died down to give way to solemn silence.

“Is true the brewer is dead?”

After Szilard's words, the caretaker reported speedily,

“Y-yes... Yesterday, a robber stabbed him to death...”

“Who was the criminal?”

At this point, a forty-year-old man stepped forward to continue the 'report' by the caretaker.

“Master Szilard. The criminal has already been captured in a trap by the police, and was arrested not long ago. I heard he pretended to be a beggar to carry out his robberies... He doesn’t seem to belong to any one organization, but was just a vagrant drug addict.”

“...A coincidence, huh... If that’s true... then we don’t know even his name. We should have originally included that brewer into our group... Even though it’s just a half-complete product, if he had drunk it then he wouldn’t have died when he encountered that robber.”

As though realizing something, Szilard tsked.

"It is as you said, Master Szilard... That person is just a boring man who only knows recipes and alchemy. Letting him into your group is a bit..."

The old caretaker ventured nervously,

"Really... perhaps that's the case."

You old folks haven't changed at all. While in Szilard's heart he ridiculed the surrounding people, his mouth just went along and agreed.

"... Another brewer can always be found. The question is the ' complete product'. Can Barnes guarantee he can complete the thing I want?"

"Yes, with a leftover of three dozen bottles."

"Is he all right on his own?"

"Since the place is a granary in public records, no one other than rats will enter, so there's no need for you to worry... And all non-members will be followed by bodyguards, because if they learn about the wine there'll be great trouble..."

You need only go yourselves. In any case, you dislike shouldering the important responsibilities. Although he continued his silent criticism with loathing, Szilard nodded his head anyway and requested the female driver behind him,

"Ennis, go pick up the wine and Barnes with your car."

"Yes."

The female driver named Ennis bowed respectfully to Szilard and the other men. With only the car keys in her hand, she started climbing the stars. From behind came another order from Szilard.

"Oh, and if Barnes dares to touch a single drop of my wine... don't hesitate- kill him. On the other hand, if he dares to waste my wine, likewise, kill him."

"... Understood."

Cold sweat started pouring down the old men's backs.

The people within this room would never die from injuries or sicknesses. Even if they fell into searing magma, as long as they didn't die of old age they could still regenerate.

But... there were also exceptions, when they could be easily ' killed'.

Those capable of this feat were the two people before them.

But, in contrast, they could never kill these two people.

This was a terror from which there was no escape.

The fear of aging would be overcome with the 'complete product' coming today. But then the terror before their eyes would never end.

If they didn't want to see the stroke of 'Death''s scythe, they had to pledge loyalty to the old man before their eyes.

Life without end. In other words, eternity.

As long as they did not die, they couldn't escape from the fear of death.

This was a contradictory vicious circle.

"That's why, use the oil like this... apply it to the leather glove. Then, bring the match close..."

On a road in East Village, a skinny man's right hand was engulfed in a blue flame.

"Oy, stoppit! Your hand will be burned off!"

The one who said this was a round, fat man, who watched anxiously from one side.

"Didn't I say before, s'alright... See, I just need to press my hand against the wall."

The skinny man pressed his hand against the wall and, because the oxygen supply was cut off, the fire extinguished instantly.

"See?"

"Ooh... That's really amazing."

As members of the Martillo family, "Ghost" Randy and " Meatball" Pezzo were busy preparing for tonight's celebrations.

Because they bought too much oil, the two had opened a bottle and were gleefully playing a dangerous game.

"Aah, there's still lots left... it'd be okay if we didn' open bottles freely."

"But what'd we needta buy next?"

"Good point... We'll get some fruits fer dessert."

Where was the closest fruit store? Just as Randy was musing over that, Pezzo opened another bottle of oil.

"Oy Pezzo, what're you doin'?"

"Nothing, I just wanna play that burning-hand game again. Y' see, this can be highlight of tonight's show, right?"

"Idiot! Why'd you open a new bottl'? There's still plenty left in this one!"

"Ah s'alright. Since we've still got so much left anyway."

Crammed in the paper bag Pezzo was cradling were over ten canisters of oil. And, perhaps as part of the store's service, there were also quite a number of can openers inside.

"I really can't stand it. I mean, forget th' oil, what's with all these can openers... It's all 'cause you bought too much, Randy."

"Can't do nothing 'bout it. The more you buy the cheaper it gets . After all, with the economy so bad it's best t' buy much as you can, while you can."

"Geez... If not f' me you'd have spent all our cash on oil."

Pezzo laughed, and pulled out an oil canister from his own bag.

"Randy, gimme a light. I can't with this paper bag in my hand."

"Can't be helped..."

Randy struck a match. As there was still a residue of oil left on his own gloves, he kept the match as far away as possible from his hands the instant the match caught fire.

"Watch."

Just as Randy was about to hand over the match to his companion, he noticed something he had overlooked earlier.

This guy's glove, is it made out of cloth--!?

But it was already too late. The moment the match touched Pezzo's huge glove it was engulfed in flames, making a '*gougou*' sound as it burned furiously.

"Woah, this won't burn through, right?

Seeing a fiercer flame than expected, Pezzo panicked and pressed his hand against the wall.

Although this extinguished the flames around his palm, other areas that didn't touch the wall were still enveloped in blue flames.

"Hey! Didn't you say that'd extinguish it!?"

"Aaaaah--! You idiot! There's oil on th' back o' your hand too!"

As soon as Pezzo's hand left the wall, the extinguished areas resumed burning.

Pezzo hurriedly flapped his hand, but the flames showed no sign of extinguishing. A lot of oil had seeped into the cloth, so Pezzo's hand became like a huge candle's wick. The paper bag was thrown aside, and oil from the opened canisters splashed against the woodwork of the white wall.

"Ouch! 'S hot!"

"Calm down! Quick, take off your glove!"

As per Randy's instructions, Pezzo tore off the glove in panic and waved his hand around frantically.

Besides some small blisters on the back of his hand, there wasn't any serious injury.

"Aaah... Thought I was a goner there..."

"Man... sorry I nearly roasted your hand."

"Not at all."

"Haha..."

The two gave a sigh of relief, and were about to pick up the fallen canisters...

They froze.

The discarded glove had landed right into a puddle of oil... What burned was not just the oil, but also the side of the wooden building. The only difference was that the blue flames had turned red.

Randy quickly surveyed the surroundings, confirming that there was no one else around.

Pezzo swept up the paper bag that, by pure chance, hadn't caught on fire, and stuffed the oil canisters back in.

In perfect synchronization, the two-man combo exchanged silent looks...

-- They nodded furiously at the same time, then fled the scene like the wind.

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Finally, finally, my greatest wish was about to become reality...

Eternal life. When I heard of similar things in myths and fairy tales, I had always snorted contemptuously and dismissed them as the same old stories. But now that I thought about it, it was what I thought of myself then... at that time, I ridiculed myself shallowly for fantasizing impossible things.

But the sight of this 'reality' made me elated, however ridiculous it seemed.

Lying on the table was a small, white rat. And within its body was the dream I was pursuing.

This species of rat was a 'seed' for experiments, created using Master Szilard's alchemy. It had an alarming reproductive ability, but only possessed a lifespan of seven days.

However, the one before my eyes had already lived for fifteen days, and it had stopped growing the third day after it drank the concocted 'wine'. If it had drunk the 'incomplete product', then the rat would not only grow, but also 'age' until it died. So in this sense, the wine I concocted should be the 'complete product'.

The hammer was swung down savagely. A piercing shrill sounded, and at the same time crimson splashed over the table.

I silently watched the splattered remains of the rat. No matter how many times I had watched this, the wait for the instant the miracle occurs always felt interminably long. If one knew the miracle existed, then every extra second always felt like a waste.

Although in reality only tenths of seconds had passed in silence, but to me, they felt like hours... No, I had been waiting for this day for decades.

As though sentient, the scattered drops of blood on the table began to move one by one. Even the blood that had seeped into the woodwork of the table crept out, like bugs drawn to sunlight. If this didn't count as a miracle, then what did?

The army of blood began to head towards its destination... to where the hammer fell- the coagulated mass that was the dead rat.

This scene gave one the mistaken feeling of time flowing backwards. No, time was reversing for the 'death' of the rat on this table.

To be able to alter the flow of time was truly a miracle, an act that could only be performed by God or demons. I too have finally waited till this day.

That's right... if such a miracle had occurred to the Master by my side, then he was already part of this 'miracle' 200 years earlier .

Twenty years ago, it was he, Master Szilard, who drew me, a simple real estate agent at the time, into becoming a 'member'.

At the time I was somewhat famous in the world of real estate, but now that I think back on it, it was a boring label. Such a common label was only a prop needed in preparation for achieving this miracle.

When I met first Master Szilard through an old friend, a Congressman (obviously a member), I didn't believe a single word they said. That was, until Master Szilard cut off his own finger.

The scene of Master Szilard's regeneration before my eyes reignited my dream of obtaining immortality.

And on that day, I obtained the 'Wine of Immortality'. Although this was called an 'incomplete product' by Master Szilard, it also granted me an indestructible body. However, there was an exception, and that was death through old age. When comparing that and the 'complete product' that could overcome this weakness, what I drank was indeed an 'incomplete product'.

At the time, I, who had drunk the 'incomplete product', was ordered by Master Szilard to recruit a brewer for making the ' completed wine' and to manage related matters. I questioned the decision to make someone as unfamiliar with alchemy as I the manager, and Master Szilard responded that, if he were to let a skilled alchemist to take over, he would not be able to trust such a

person. Although I still don't understand the Master's words, as long as it was Master's Szilard who said them, they shouldn't be wrong.

For the next 30 years, I repeated the same routine daily- issuing orders to the brewer, testing the 'wine' on the rats- everyday was as thus. Because there was poison in the ingredients of the recipe, there was no need to worry about the clueless brewer secretly trying the experimental product. And the truth was that the lab rats that didn't drink the completed wine would die immediately... Just as the rats that drank the 'incomplete product' quietly waited for old age to catch up. No matter which it was, the ending was always the same.

Although the work was painstaking, it was at least tolerable- what made the work most trying was that damnable prohibition act. Although it was a pointless law made by a bunch of useless guys, it posed a significant problem. Just as the word 'wine' in the experimental product's name suggests, this medicine needed to be disguised as alcohol. But with the damnable prohibition act, we couldn't openly operate a large-scale brewery, or purchase large quantities of one of the ingredients, alcohol; everything became incredibly difficult.

But now, all that pain was but sweet memory. It seemed changing the brewer every once in a while was a brilliant plan. Of course, once everything of use has been extracted from a brewer, they would die from a convenient accident.

The current brewer who completed the product- perhaps because he had still some value left after producing the product, or

because Master Szilard still had some other plans in mind for him- was granted, for the moment, his life as a reward.

I never thought of him as someone who cared about money, but I heard he lost not only his money but also his life when he encountered a robber.

Ah well, he was just that kind of person.

It didn't matter anymore, as I was already grasping the fruit of our work in my hands. All that was left was to show it to Master Szilard.

The fully restored rat started struggling from the pain of the large iron pins binding its paws. What a lucky rat. To receive the power of 'eternity' one step earlier than even me.

A little jealous, I raised the hammer again.

The piercing shrill persisted. At this moment, coming from the ceiling of the basement... which was to say, from the floorboards of the surface, came a knocking sound. Aah, this was the code between us 'members'. I quickly pressed a switch, which meant the light on the ground floor should be on.

After a while, there was another knocking sound on the floorboards.

Aah, had Master Szilard has finally come? If he saw the three dozen bottles of the completed product, I really didn't know what he would say. Then afterwards, I could finally be freed from the fear of 'dying of old age'.

Heart pounding with anticipation, I climbed stairs and slowly opened the floorboards.

Immediately, I felt a wave of hot air rush over my face as I emerged from below the floorboards.

What was this?

Seeing the source of knocking noise shocked me.

By the wall, the collapsed sections of the shelves made the knocking sound as they hit the ground one by one.

And the other side of the room was painted a brilliant red by the fire in here.

Why. Why was it always now? Why did it have to be now of all times that a fire started!

There was nothing on the floor that was flammable!

The wine... I must take the wine out... I hurriedly descended the stars, and lifted up the crate of the 'complete product'... I couldn't! It was too heavy, it was impossible for one person to carry them all out on their own!

Although I had obtained immortal flesh, there was no change to my strength.

Just a little... Just that little bit more and I could complete my own, unique evolution... The evolved me was precisely thus... A tiny, insignificant speck who couldn't even lift 36 bottles of wine!

--aa --- someone-- someone come-- someone --!

"Ah... Can you come here for a second, Mr. Maiza?"

Hearing Firo's shout from the outside, Maiza peeked out of the fruit store.

"What is the matter... ah!"

Above the roofs of the houses, just across the road from the store, rose a column of gray smoke. The distance between the store and that place wasn't far. It looked like they were only two streets apart.

"I'll go take a look."

"Aah, it's best if you don't stir up trouble. If by any chance the police come..."

Held in Firo's hand was the illegally-produced wine just bought from the black market. Although they were mixed in with other goods in the box, if the police... especially Edward, discovered it, then the result would be unthinkable.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything silly."

Firo didn't look the slightest bit concerned, and sauntered in the direction of the incident while waving at Maiza.

"Aah, aah, this aspect of yours needs to be changed after the ' ceremony'..."

Maiza gave a faint, bitter smile, even as he headed towards the incident.

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"How can this be..."

Ennis got out of the car, and when she saw the dense smoke billowing into the sky, she almost though she had gone the wrong way. But now she wished she really had been mistaken.

Unfortunately, the tragic reality was that the sign on two-story building burning before her eyes read "Barnes Company Granary" . The cool expression when she was facing those old men was gone . She never thought something this serious would happen.

"Just what happened... How is Master Barnes...?"

The young driver pushed aside the spectators to stand in front of the crowd. Although all the people were irritated by the driver's actions, their attention was immediately drawn back to the fire, so no one stopped her or even complained.

The collapse of inner structure of the building could be clearly seen from the outside. Even from a distance, it was obvious quite a few places on the ground floor have caved in. However, if the ' complete product' was kept in the basement as usual, even if she were to rush inside now... it wasn't possible to retrieve the product .

Utter despair. How was she supposed to report to Master Szilard? Even if she wasn't the slightest bit responsible for what had happened, her heart could not be heavier. Master Szilard definitely won't be angry, but it was certain he would show his displeasure. And furthermore, those old men were certain to despair many more times than she did, making her heart ache.

"...-iss, miss!"

When she felt the hand on her shoulder, Ennis came out of her reverie.

Standing before her eyes was a youth, around the same age as her or a little younger.

"Are you all right? Your face is pale..."

Ennis understood that this youth with mature speech was concerned about her.

Was she really so shaken she revealed her feelings so openly? Ennis hurriedly sorted out her emotions and answered as though there nothing special was going on,

"Ah... No, nothing's the matter... Thank you for your concern."

With that, she turned to push through the crowds and squeezed out.

Perhaps Barnes escaped. When she thought of that she felt compelled to search the surrounding streets, and so she quickly picked an alleyway and disappeared within.

What a cold reply, but if that was how she responded there was nothing he could do about it.

When Firo arrived at the scene of the fire, there was a large, black car parked to one side.

He was surprised to see that the person emerging from the driver's seat was a woman. And this woman... from her appearance she looked only one or two years older, or maybe even around the same age as him. Not only was her behavior unusual, her clothing stood out. Although she was a woman, she wore a full black suit and a pair of sturdy army or police boots on her feet. From just her attire one could never tell she was a woman, but

perhaps because the material was thin, even if she wore a suit it didn't make her seem stiff. With her overly short hair, she could be said to be an unusual specimen among women... But combining all the peculiarities of dress and looks gave her a sense of allure.

This kind of counter-trend appearance held a certain appeal to the youth.

And he felt that her reaction to this fire was a little extreme- shoving aside the crowd, clearly distressed, and not giving him a chance to get close.

Standing where the true extent of fire could be seen clearly... was this woman standing before the crowd, despairing... No, it would be more accurate to say she had a kind of mournful look as she stood there, stunned.

Unable to take it any longer, the youth couldn't help but also push through the crowds to greet the woman, but he never thought he would receive that kind of answer. The youth watched the leaving woman a little regretfully...

Huh...? She's not going towards the car...?

The car that woman was driving was already washed under by a new wave of spectators. But she didn't bother checking the state of it and headed straight for an alley in another direction.

So something was wrong after all. Firo was a little interested in the situation, and he also wanted to talk to the woman from just now. In truth, it was more likely 'love at first sight' for Firo.

In Firo's mind, his interest between the fire and the woman was clearly tipped towards the latter. So he too began to wade against the tide of the crowd.

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"That's strange... She turned right at this junction just now..."

New York's roads were as complex as a web. Although the roads were laid out in a very orderly manner, the sheer number of them made it easy to get lost, even with such a simple structure.

Firo had originally wanted to follow the woman, but at some point he was already lost in the maze of the city. To Firo, a resident of this city in the first place, the way home, the wide streets and narrow alleys, the black market for liquor... all of it was deeply ingrained in his mind. But Firo simply had no way knowing the movement of people within the city.

Furthermore, this area should be the territory of the 'Gandor Family'.

The Gandor Family was one of the countless Mafia organizations within New York, operating on a similar scale and controlling about the same amount of territory as the Martillo Family. But the three Gandor brothers governing this group were infamous for their ruthlessness and fighting skills, while their underlings were easily moved to violence at the slightest disagreement.

"Oh man... That girl better not have been kidnapped by those guys."

The frustration and worry in Firo's heart wasn't without reason. It would not be unusual for those guys to pull off something like this.

If it's the real Gandors then it's still alright. But the regular hoodlums who aren't under the direct control of the brothers won't hold back

As Firo surveyed his surroundings, a man's shout came from not too far away. Since he had no leads anyway, Firo's curiosity led him to head in the direction where the sound came from.

Around the bend of the alley, he saw quite a few figures moving around. Four young people were surrounding an old man, shouting something.

Firo slowly approached those people, listening to them speak. And it seemed like none of them had noticed Firo's appearance yet .

"...You still won't apologize, you old shithead?"

"Cut the crap...! You were the ones who tripped me!"

At the old man's furious shout, one of the men swung his foot savagely at his foreleg.

The old man let out a painful cry, his body curling up into a ball .

"Bullshit, old man! When we asked you so nicely, 'Your crate looks heavy, want some help?', do you remember what you said, you bastard?"

Another man, not the one who previously kicked the old man, kicked the old man's agonized face.

"Didn't you say something like 'Get lost, you scum' then? Duncha think that's a bit much?"

Another kick, this time to the other side of his face. There shouldn't be any more sensation of pain- this attack was more of a psychological nature.

"Thanks to your rudeness, I accidentally stuck out my leg... and because you stumbled my shoes got dirty. Not to mention the ticks on your body have all jumped onto me. I'm gonna itch to death, so what d'you think we should do?"

"What nonsense are you talking about..."

"We didn't ask for yer opinion!"

The old man's leg was kicked again by the man who seemed like the leader.

The intense pain made the old man realize that it was better to apologize honestly and quickly give these people some money.

Right now, his fighting skills weren't enough to deal with this trash. Furthermore, he still had a mission he needed to complete.

"Ah, I understand. I was wrong. If it's money you want..."

The leader curled his thumb and index finger into the shape of a golf ball and grabbed the old man's throat. But even if the old man wanted to beg he couldn't speak- just breathing became a difficult task.

"We didn't ask for your opinion, how many times do we gotta repeat ourselves before you understand?"

Because the old man was suffering too much, the crate he was hugging seemed on the verge of falling. He desperately tried to breathe, concentrating his entire being on holding onto the crate.

"...What's this... Old man, you care so much about this box?"

One of the men reached out to touch the box. Somehow, the old man found enough energy to break free from the man's death grip, protect the precious crate, and to try to escape from the scene.

But unfortunately, he was tripped again.

The fallen old man was kicked and stepped on mercilessly on both sides. Then, he was turned over by a man's foot.

"That box is gonna be ours. So just agree to that, hm?"

Resting his foot on the old man's stomach, the leader bent down and nudged the crate.

At this moment, the old man seemed to want to protest. He raised his head to say something, but was viciously stomped back to the ground by a man by his side.

The old man felt his brain being violently jolted and passed out instantly.

"Now then... what's this. Wine?"

The leader opened the box and found two dark-green bottles. This type of bottle was rare, and the liquid sloshing around inside was definitely not aqueous. The reason why he was certain it was not water was because of the viscosity in the liquid's movement.

If what was inside was really wine, then why did this old man fight so hard? Maybe because it was high-quality wine? As the leader pondered over this, he finally noticed Firo, who had been watching from the sidelines all along.

"... What, boy? Watcha lookin' at?"

For a moment, Firo wasn't sure what to do at being found out.

Firo personally felt that the entire situation was as those hoodlums said: that this old man deserved it. Although these guys were a little excessive, when he thought about what he did to the robber this morning it amounted to more or less the same thing. However, there was a big difference between wanting to injure and wanting to kill, and Firo didn't want be compared with these people.

"Oh, nothing... being called 'low-life scum' first thing by some old guy- of course anybody would get angry, but since these guys are robbers they should at least be prepared to be marked by the police... Or perhaps they are confident that, after they finish dealing with this old man, they can clean up the crime scene?... Maybe I'm thinking too much."

Confronted by a youth who spoke unexpectedly like an adult, the men exchanged disbelieving looks.

Then the leader among them spoken, displeasure written all over his face.

"... Hey, brat, speak more respectfully to those older than you- didn't your mama teach you that? Or was your mama busy all night getting customers off the streets, so she couldn't feed you milk?"

Although he was cracking a vulgar joke, there was no laughter in the leader's eyes.

This was the second time he had been lectured about speaking courteously. Firo thought this, and gave a sigh with a bored expression. Never mind the police, even this guy was chiding him.

"... I may be a brat who isn't even twenty, but what about you? From what you say and what you do, you don't seem much older than I."

The group of guys quietened down. It seemed as though he had angered them, but at the same time that didn't seem to be the case.

"... You, you're not from around here, are you?"

"I'm a New Yorker, like you. I'm a *picciotto* of the Martillo family, Firo."

Firo introduced himself as modestly as he could- that was the minimal level of politeness afforded.

"Martillo huh? Never heard of it before... What about you guys?"

The other men smiled mockingly, shaking their heads.

"... Ha! Should be a small group then... or perhaps just a bunch of school kids playing make-believe?"

"... I think our organization should be around the same size as your superiors', the Gandor Family."

Firo originally thought those guys would retort, but they didn't even seem angry.

"Huh? Who'd you just say we're underlings of...?"

Could it be these guys really had nothing to do with the Gandor Family? In that case, he was paying these guys far too much respect... Firo thought that as he waited for an answer.

"You actually lumped us together with the rabble? We ain't managed by anyone. Having to form those so-called families is just proof of your weakness, isn't it? I mean, we've always operated in this area, but the Gandors didn't even dare to complain."

Aah, so that was what it was. Finally Firo understood.

What they were really saying was that they were just a bunch of hoodlums. It wasn't that they were unwilling to join an organization, but rather they weren't even qualified to join.

"Really. Well, enough of that. Just disappear."

On hearing Firo's words, the men's expressions didn't change.

"... What did you say?"

"I said, enough. Although there're a bunch of things I'd like to ask, it's obvious you won't tell me anyway. If that's the case then I should've asked more casually. Wasting my time on guys like you really ticks me off, but ah well, I won't beat you up- just quickly disappear. Have I made myself clear?"

That was all said in one breath.

Having said that, Firo strode forward. At this moment, one of the men walked up to him quickly.

"You brat, who d'you think you are!"

The man grabbed Firo's collar and pulled him close to his face.

The youth gave a light sigh, then used this as an opportunity to start his counterattack.

His left hand shot out towards his opponent's throat. Because the man's right hand was currently grasping Firo's collar, he couldn't immediately stop his attack.

Firo's left hand was now right before the man's face, and that throat... Just below the man's Adam's apple, he used his thumb and index finger to lock onto the man's throat tightly.

"----------!"

The man's throat couldn't sound a cry of pain. He let go of Firo's collar, both hands covering his own throat shakily.

"You guys gave that old man this treatment just now, right?"

"Damn it!"

From Firo's side came another man.

Firo merely gently tilted back his torso, seizing this opportunity to grab the opponent's left hand. That man hurriedly raised his right hand and swung it at Firo. However, the unnatural posture meant this punch didn't have any speed or power. In the end, his right fist was also delivered straight into Firo's hand.

Both hands were caught by Firo. If he didn't free himself from this sticky situation, then it'd be dangerous for the man. So he lifted his leg and stomped downwards. Although it was a good tactic, but... it was too late.

In that instant, Firo used the man's hands to pull him forward, towards Firo's back. The man's arms crossed at his elbows and folded together at Firo's left shoulder.

Then, maintaining this pose, Firo adjusted his center of gravity slightly and bent over forcefully in one go. The overlapping wrists on his shoulder gave out a creaking '*mishi mishi*' sound. Unable to take the pain, all thoughts of fighting back were forgotten.

Just like that, the man's legs left the ground, and in the midst of all that was happening, the world turned over.

A split second later, the man's lower back... no, rather, his entire body was consumed by pain.

"Oooh... How did it turn out like this... I'm getting a little impressed at myself."

Compared to the man in agony, it was Firo, responsible for sending that man flying, who was astonished. This technique was something that Japanese person within the organization had taught him long ago, but to execute an upper-hand throw so beautifully like today was a first for him.

"Ugh... aaaah..."

Seeing their groaning comrades on the ground, the two remaining hoodlums couldn't help but suck in a chilly breath. If all four people had attacked together, then taking care of the brat would've been a breeze. They never imagined that now, not only

were they unable to hit the youth, but he would be standing next to the old man, unscathed.

This brat wasn't someone to be messed with. The leader began to evaluate the youth before him in a new light.

At this moment, the other man had already pulled out a knife, pointing it at Firo.

"... aah, you're even took out a knife..."

Although Firo looked scared on the surface, he was actually feeling very light-hearted.

Firo slipped into the midst of the hoodlum gang with ease, raising both hands as he said,

"Oy oy... there shouldn't be need to pull out a knife for such a small quarrel, right?"

"Shut up! Not begging for mercy until now..."

As he said that, the man wielding the knife stabbed it at Firo. Firo jumped up and delivered an accurate kick to the man's wrist holding the knife. As expected, the knife fell to the ground with a clatter. It bounced off the ground and was kicked far away by Firo.

"Ah..."

The man couldn't help but watch the knife.

Then, in the lower corner of his eye, there seemed to be something rushing at him.

By the time he realized it was Firo's fist, it was too late. His nose received a heavy blow just as his lower abdomen was savagely kicked by Firo, and he fell to the ground.

"And? What're you planning to do now?"

Firo turned his head to regard the leader. The leader reached into his inner pocket impassively.

"From now on, I should be qualified to play make-believe at school, right?"

Firo returned the insult received earlier. The leader ignored what Firo said, and walked straight towards the first man who had grabbed Firo's chest. Although the man had already stood up, he was still massaging his own throat painfully. After saying a few words to every man Firo had taken down, the leader lent them his shoulder and hauled them up one by one.

These men gave Firo one last, hateful glance, then fled, defeated . Left behind were Firo and the still unconscious old man.

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"Hey, gramps, gramps!... Are you all right?"

Feeling the hard blows to his cheeks, Barnes finally woke up.

He quickly sat up. No pain. The internal bleeding and broken bones had been completely 'restored'.

Before him was a man who looked younger than the group just now. He was kneeling on the ground, staring him curiously. And---- the crate was still cradled in his hands.

When Barnes confirmed it was there, he breathed a sigh of relief ... then, he gave Firo a startled look.

Did this youth saved him? He couldn't believe that a young child was capable of chasing those guys away, but as long as the crate was all right all was good. Barnes was a little worried about the contents of the crate and, on peeking inside, he found the wine bottles still intact. The wine inside was also very safe.

"Is this more important than you? The stuff inside the box."

Firo asked with considerable interest. So Barnes quickly covered the crate and hugged the crate tighter.

"Shu- shut up! This has nothing to do with you guys! Do you also want my wine? If it's money then I'll give you any amount you want! So just leave!"

"Hey, hey, what's this attitude of yours towards your savior...? Now I finally understand how those guys felt."

Although Firo wrinkled his brow when he spoke, he didn't look all that angry.

"Oh yes, old man. Did you see a girl wearing a black suit just now?"

At the sudden bewildering question, Barnes' thoughts became a little chaotic. A girl wearing a suit, shouldn't it be someone from a theater...? But when he thought about it a little more carefully, Barnes suddenly remembered one such person.

Master Szilard's driver...

Because he needed to communicate with Master Szilard, he had had contact with Ennis quite a few times. She was the only person other than Master Szilard capable of killing him.

"No... Dunno anything."

"I see... Oh well, sorry for bothering you."

After Firo said that, he left immediately without anymore thoughts about the old man.

Watching the youth's back, Barnes pondered. Why did this youth want to find Master Szilard's female driver?

Barnes was too preoccupied with this matter, and so neglected another important matter. Which was why did Firo not get angry over his overly brusque words.

If he had taken note of this matter, he wouldn't need to say it himself... Even the fates of Firo and the others would change dramatically.

But sadly, Barnes would never notice it.

Fate began peacefully steering its own spiraling path.

Now, Barnes was walking along a quiet alleyway, alone.

Things would be less problematic if he headed back to the main road, but he didn't have time for that. He needed to get to the building Master Szilard was waiting at as soon as possible... After he obtained immortality, he could take good care of those discourteous hoodlums, like getting them into a car accident or something similar.

But would he really be able to obtain immortality? Although the fire was unexpected, he was only able to preserve two bottles of the 'complete product', so he may be killed by Master Szilard. No. Perhaps he really would be killed. But there he could do nothing about it. After all, he wasn't able to complete the mission assigned by Master Szilard.

But, if he really were to---

This almost extinguished hope spurred Barnes' feet to take larger strides.

Don't think anymore, just get to the destination.

But cold fate always toyed around with mankind. Barnes didn't know that a merciless fate was approaching him from behind.

The back of Barnes' collar was grabbed and he was yanked back by someone.

When Barnes was forced to turn his head, a voice full of fury came from his front.

"So it's just you left, you old shitbag."

Standing before Barnes were the four hoodlums he imagined dying in a car accident.

"It's best you let us drink up this wine."

Barnes, who had passed out from the pain of having both arms and legs broken, was tossed into a garbage area by that group of hoodlums.

When Ennis arrived, his broken arms and legs hadn't yet recovered.

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Not too far from this garbage area was a jazz hall. In the basement of the jazz hall was the headquarters of the Gandor Family.

Along with this background music, a dozen men were drinking wine, laughing, shouting- all these sounds mixed to give an indescribable feel to this place.

From just the looks one could tell the people there weren't of the friendly sort. These men were sat scattered around this cramped store, doing whatever they liked.

Yet in such a rowdy place was a pool of silence.

Seated around the central, round table were four men, who were surrounded by a dozen standing men, watching the scene at the table. They seemed to be playing poker.

Of the four men around the table, three seemed very light-hearted, almost like they enjoyed this ambiance. But the remaining person looked a little strange, as though he was very nervous.

This man shakily opened his mouth to say,

"Th... Tha- that-... That is really r-rare... For all three bosses to all have jokers in their hands..."

George, in charge of managing the group's finances, said the above, while secretly scrutinizing the other three 'brothers'' expressions.

"..."

Sitting on his left was the boss of the Gandor Family and oldest of the three brothers, Keith Gandor, who was a man of few words. In the five years since Keith joined the organization, he had yet to see Keith open his mouth to say something.

"Shut up, George! When playing poker you're supposed to be silent!"

Sitting opposite him and sprouting nonsense was the second-in-command in the organization, Berga Gandor. Although only the second in the organization, he was easily the strongest out of all the brothers, larger than the boss by two sizes. And his personality was a volatile one and easily angered.

"Ah, ah, Berga-bro, calm down... people say that if you get angry, Lady Luck will run away... Sorry about that, George..."

Sitting on the right and speaking at a leisurely pace was the third in the organization and youngest of the three, Luck Gandor. Although he was only around twenty, his calculative and social skills were outstanding, and as such he was often entrusted with important tasks.

Luck always wore a faint smile and always spoke politely, regardless of whether he was speaking to underlings or older seniors. This type of person in this country could be said to be rarity. But George knew in his heart that Luck's smile was just a movement of his lips, and that in reality his eyes always gave off a cold light.

"Ah... no... thanks..."

Unable to articulate anything more than simple syllables, George could only lower his head and silently arrange the cards in his hand.

If he had a dispute with them over the issue of respect, he believed many terrible things would happen in the rest of his days. So, after weighing the two options, George could only grit his teeth and pretend to be busy with reorganizing the poker cards.

"Oh yes, oh yes! I just remembered something interesting!"

When everyone had sorted out their own cards, Berga, having shut George up, exclaimed loudly.

"It's about that guy, Dobby. He says you shouldn't gamble with money all the time, so playing this every once in a while is quite good!"

Having said that, he carelessly took out a black case and dumped it onto the table.

It was a revolver.

The oldest and the youngest brothers silently stared at their own cards without any response whatsoever.

"Uh... um... Mr. Berga?"

"This is the so-called Russian roulette!"

On hearing that, George felt as though the world had darkened before his eyes.

"Eh... about that... you're kidding right... someone could die?"

"No problem! Just choose correctly and no one dies."

"How can you joke around like this..."

George looked to Luck for help, but he didn't respond at all.

"Then... Let's shuffle the cards together."

George's shaking became more intense. If the cards were shuffled that way, he was certain that he was the one who would have the gun pointed at his temple.

It seemed the only way out was to sneakily change the cards. At the very least, George had a little confidence in this. As a precaution, he had hidden a pack of cards in his sleeve. If he used it, then perhaps he could at least put together the same suit.

Although a little nervous about cheating right in front of his bosses, George reasoned it was much better than letting the gun point at his own head.

George lifted his head to watch his opponents' movements... and in that moment his body froze, becoming as stiff as ice.

The stares.

Dozens of cold eyes were fixed on George's hand.

Keith, Berge, Luck, the spectators surrounding them- even the guys who never approached the table had stopped what they were doing and were staring at George's hand.

The only sound that broke the absolute silence of the basement was the jazz music that came through the ceiling sporadically. But the intermittent silence only added to George's terror.

Perhaps because the terror was too much, George even forgot to tremble. Even the flow of time in the surroundings became strange . George felt like he was going to go insane and, to keep his wits clear, forced his throat to articulate words.

"..... Ga..... ah..... no..... wh-... wha-wh-what's the matter.. .... why's everyone... Is there s-s-s-something wr-wr-wr-wrong w-with my h-h-handdddddd?"

Trying not to shake, he finally managed to force out his words. Everyone stared at the pitiful George, then unexpectedly Berga replied coolly,

"...hm? Oh, no... weren't you gonna cheat? Everyone's watching with their eyes wide open. Don't mind us."

George's heart skipped a beat.

Can it be, can it be, the cat got out of the bag? No, that isn't possible. It shouldn't be possible.

George desperately put on a bland expression. If he hadn't been so panicked, he might have seen what he didn't notice at the time.

"Ha... haha... don't be silly, Mr. Berga... how could I cheat... right, Mr. Luck?"

Luck's mouth curved upwards as he spoke, his eyes still filled with amusement.

"If it were you, who lined your pockets with the organization's money for the past two years..."

This time, George was truly scared to the point where he couldn 't move at all.

It's out! It's out! It's out it's out it's out out out I'll be killed I'll be killed I'll be killed—!

George wanted to say something, but his mouth could only chatter and he couldn't even breathe. The cold sweat that broke out on his back seemed to be a manifestation of his own terror.

"Do you think our eyes are there just for show? Then again, to not have discovered it in the two years, maybe they are just decorations after all..."

George's lip trembled violently as Luck stared coldly at him, continuing tonelessly.

"... I heard that recently, there've been some druggies wandering around our area... I suspected that it may be related to one of our people, so I investigated."

If small groups like Gandor or Martillo were involved in narcotics, other groups might see them as incompetent and regard them to be an enemy. Furthermore, proving that their own organization was not related to these goods washed away suspicions of merchants paying protection money.

"... But in the middle of the investigation I noticed something completely unrelated to drugs... George... those books you hold... some of the losses have been a little excessive... unimaginable, really... And I also heard about some other matters... what comes after this, you understand, right, George? With your intelligence..."

George had long stopped taking in anything that was said. His vacant eyes gazed sightlessly into empty space.

"... In the end, the druggie was caught by the police this morning and they understand that this has nothing to do with us... Are you listening, Mr. George?"

George's ears didn't register any sound. Sweat, pouring like rain, reflected the state of George's heart.

Realizing that this was just a waste of time, Luck laid out his cards on the table.

"Ace, five cards."

Then Berga used his hand to knock his own cards.

"Gah! I've lost I've lost! King, five cards!"

Last, Keith quietly showed his hand.

"..."

Five jokers were quietly laid onto the table.

"Big brother won it all."

"We can never win against Keith."

Faced with such obvious trickery, the three people along the table burst out laughing- *haha haha haha*. George alone didn't laugh .

There were seven jokers on the table. The Grim Reapers drawn on these cards were grinning at George.

When the men's laughter quietened down, Luck said lightly,

"Mr. George, hurry up and show us your cards..."

As though hypnotized by Luck, cards drifted down from George's stiff hand. Two of them were covered, so Luck flipped them over... Anyone could tell that the five cards put together gave a 'rubbish hand'.

"So... Everyone still remembers the rules we just said, right, George?"

Berga threw the gun placed at the centre of the table to George. Bullets... six of them. The cartridge was full.

"Now, Russian roulette. A game of roulette with a 100% chance of winning? You will have to suffer at least one shot."

Faced with his impending death, George calmed down instead.

Why did he have to die? Everything he did, it was just using money of those useless people on himself. He did it for survival and even then... He simply couldn't understand why he had to be killed by idiots who didn't even know how to earn money. He should at least be given a chance to live.

There was no regret or soul-searching in George's heart, only disgust for the fate he reaped.

Then, George stared at the revolver on the table without saying a word. Then, he looked up again at the surrounding people. No one had taken out any guns or knives yet.

Are you laughing at me? That's why I said, these guys are all idiots.

George slowly reached out for the gun, then slowly brought the gun to his own temple—

"----------!"

George suddenly pointed the muzzle forward and pulled the trigger. In his eyes was the eldest of the three brothers.

The trigger, once... twice... three times four five six times...

Ga-chik

Ga-chi- ga-chik

Ga-chi- ga-chi- ga-chik

No gunfire flared from the muzzle.

In the silent basement, there was only the metallic sound of the trigger striking flint. This sound melded together with the music coming from the ceiling to become a marvelous ensemble, reverberating in George's ear.

"... It's such a pity, George."

Luck said very sorrowfully. It was rare to see his emotions shaken, his eyes full of hurt.

"Look closely... The cartridge is completely empty..."

Berga's face was expressionless as he stated the startling fact.

Facing George, who stood stunned and uncomprehendingly at his original position, Luck gave his verdict.

"... You know, George, we... We are very thankful for all the work you've done until now. So, we three came to a decision after a little discussion. If you came to an understanding and pulled the trigger at yourself, then we wouldn't say anything and just chase you out of the organization. If you cried and begged for mercy, we

would beat you half to death then chase you out of the organization. If you persisted in pretending to be confused, we would cut off your tongue then chase you out of the organization. Looks like... you chose the worst of the lot. This is truly regrettable. ”

Luck finished speaking, shook his head and didn’t say anything more.

George truly despaired this time, regretting wholeheartedly what he had done. He should have at least cried and begged for mercy.

But of course it wasn’t too late to do so now. But just as George opened his mouth to say something—

A huge shoe flew straight into his open mouth.

In the blink of the eye, Berga had jumped onto the table, and, like a kid kicking a ball, swung his foot savagely at George’s face.

“... Don’t upset my l’il bro and big brother anymore.”

Frowning, Berga stared down with contempt at the traitor who had fallen onto the floor. Next to Berga’s head, the large, hanging light bulb swung violently to and fro.

A few teeth had been sent flying from George’s mouth; the whites of his eyes were rolled back, showing through the slits of his eyes. It was clear George had completely lost consciousness.

On seeing this, some of the spectators watching the poker game started moving. They picked up George's body, stuffed it into a prepared gunnysack, and, just like that, George was lifted by two people... who climbed the stairs leading up to the surface.

Then, the sack was placed in a car and left the city, wobbling to and fro as the car drove towards the sea.

Although he had temporarily lost his consciousness, George would probably never open his eyes again.

The man who knew George's fate spoke quietly with his so-far unused voice.

"... he's a real fool..."

The only people who heard Keith's soft mumble were the two younger brothers by his side.

A few minutes after the gunnysack was sent off, one of the members of the organization came down from the jazz hall.

"Mr. Luck... Dallas and his crew want to see you."

Dallas... who's that? A few connected names and faces emerged in Luck's mind.

He finally remembered those incompetent hoodlums who frequented his territory.

"All right. Take their weapons first."

A short while later, the worn and weary crew of four entered.

From just seeing them in that sorry state, Luck already knew that '*aah, they've lost a fight*'. And with that, Luck could more or less guess what they were here for.

"--- so, that brat called Firo, just—"

"I must decline."

Luck interrupted in the middle of the other man's speech, clearly refusing their request. Although that man was about the same age as himself, Luck still chose to reply politely.

"For what possible reason do you think we should be obliged to help you?"

"That... no... that's... because he's an outsider messing around on your territory!"

"You aren't our members, so you don't have to worry about our 'affairs'. Of course, if you had made some donations to us in the past, then you could feel free to talk to us and we'd definitely do everything we could to help you."

This was the truth. This kind of small organization existed solely on the trust (and sometimes also on the fear) of the citizens who paid the protection money.

"... If you put it that way, we've spent money on your wine in the black market."

"And in exchange you got the wine, didn't you. Isn't that a fair trade?"

"In that case, how about this, Mr. Luck... If you help us, we'll join your organization... This isn't a joke."

These words sapped Luck of all energy. Why did these people think so highly about themselves? And it was a group who had been given a beating by one person!

Feeling that further dialog was just a waste of time, Luck decided to clarify matters.

"You know, Mr. Dallas... Have you ever considered why we allowed your outrageous behavior on our territory? You can't honestly think we ignore your antics because we're afraid of you? Frankly speaking, we never invited you guys simply because there wasn't any use for you. At most you can serve as cannon fodder in a gunfight with the police. We certainly can't give cannon fodder work. Moreover, we permitted your behavior because-"

Luck rested for a breath.

"-Because you attract the police's attention. While the police are busy investigating your activities, their surveillance on us relaxes considerably."

Although this wasn't what he actually thought, he felt it was better to say it in this manner. Letting these guys into the organization would only draw attention from the police and become a stumbling block in the organization's development- that much was true.

After hearing Luck's words, the four flushed red. To be able to gain influence among the ranks of Mafia wasn't something that should be looked down on. It looked like they really couldn't take him lightly.

"... Oy... That was really over the top. D'you know what we're capable of?"

"At the very least I know you were beaten black and blue by a youth who was younger than you. That was what you told to me a little while ago, unless I am much mistaken?"

"You--!"

The leader, Dallas, didn't think of stopping his angered comrades. Perhaps he just wanted the others to understand his bearing and influence, so maintaining the minimal level of manners was still effective.

"Ughraaa!"

His comrade who had just stood up let out a pained cry and fell onto the floor. Looking around, he saw Berga standing to one side with his fist clenched.

"Brother Berga."

"Luck... What's with these rude guys?"

After thinking for a while, the younger brother said,

"Dunno them."

"I see, people we don't know. Then that's trespassing."

"Almost got killed by them."

"Really? Then my action just now is considered self-defense."

Hearing Berga's knuckles cracking, the remaining three people shot up instantly.

"That's it, if you are able to take down Brother Berga, then I'll acknowledge your strength, Mr. Dallas."

Unlike Firo, Berga, who was in a foul mood, didn't stop attacking once the enemy once they were down. The guy who had fallen just now had his face stomped on quite a few times by Berga .

Three minutes later... they left in a worse state than before... that 's to say, the worn-out and battered foursome fled the office in a panic.

In the basement from which the four were chased, Luck realized they left something behind.

“What’s this crate...? Wine?”

Inside the wooden box were two bottles of wine. Did it belong to those guys just now? If so then it didn’t matter whether they were thrown away or drunk, but otherwise it posed a big problem.

When everyone was gathered together tomorrow, he would ask whose it was.

Luck set the crate on the safe, and the brothers made preparations to leave.

The spiral of fate revolved tranquilly.

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When I opened my eyes, I saw Master.

Master Szilard. My Master, and also the person I adored and respected the most.

Taking in the surroundings, I found it to be a very familiar place . Yes, this was indeed close to the Grand Central Station... the ‘ members’’ clubhouse.

“Ennis... why didn’t you kill him?”

Master Szilard didn’t even spare me a glance, and reproved the people-shy female driver standing at by the entrance to the clubhouse.

“Yes... because I felt that it wouldn’t be too late to kill him after finding out what happened.”

At the door behind Master Szilard stood the group of elderly members. Everyone looked as though they had all taken a big blow. Some were crying despite their old age. Others stared at me with hate-filled eyes. Sadness or disgust, I still felt their behavior was rather too excessive for people their age.

Aah, that must be it- everyone must be mourning the fact that I wasn’t able to protect the ‘complete product’. The Congressman with less than a year left in his tenure was already wailing.

“Hm... Don’t speak of such petty things again! ... You should be able to kill anyone without hesitation, unless you’re unwilling to because you know him? Saying some nonsense like finding out what happened...”

Master Szilard’s hand was already stretched before my face.

Aah, as I thought, I was going to be killed.

But it couldn't be helped. After all, I didn't complete Master's mission.

My last hope of survival, those two bottles of the completed product- I never thought they'd be taken by those scum in the end. But being killed personally by Master Szilard was also an unsurpassable honor in its own right.

"Finding out what happened and such... You achieve that by just doing this..."

Master Szilard's palm rested on my head.

Then all my memories were immediately snatched away. Whatever was asked, I replied in 'whole'. I felt all the blood rushing to my head. Not just blood. From the tips of my feet, muscles began to dry up. I felt the withered muscle shattering, slowly being absorbed into my body. Aah, my feet were already gone.

Memories... I could feel my memories being sucked away... Aah , now I thought about it, I was becoming a part of Master Szilard. Another way of putting it is that I have obtained immortality. But if I really gained immortality, what did I want to do?

Aah, my abdomen had also disappeared. Quickly, I must remember quickly. But, why is my stomach gone? Aah, Master Szilard is before me. Ah, that was right, I am currently being punished by Master Szilard. But why did I have to be punished?

Aah, that was right, because I didn't complete my mission. But, what was this mission? I already couldn't recall. That was right, I needed to think of something.

Aah, that was right, I remember, I remember all of it.

I wanted the power of immortality.

I wanted to become a hero, like in myths and legends.

Because I wanted to protect this country.

No, that was not right, not this country.

It was Mother, because I wanted to help Mother. Mother was beaten everyday by that stubborn guy...

Who was that guy? Couldn't remember. Only recalled that he died in a car accident.

That guy died in the car accident. together with mother.

what's a mother? can't remember

what's remembering

ah—

a-

- - Barnes' narration gradually goes from kanji to hiragana in the scene in which he is eaten.

It was a strange sight.

When Master Szilard placed his palm on Barnes' forehead, Barnes immediately dried up.

No, drying up wasn't an accurate description. Rather, the tissues lost moisture and shattered, and the shattered pieces of meat were sucked in like by a vacuum... if one had to describe it in a sentence.

'Devoured by the right hand'.

This kind of description was very appropriate.

Starting from his feet, bit by bit, Barnes' body disappeared from this world.

The last to remain was the head, and even as it shattered... like a vacuum machine, it disappeared into Master Szilard's right hand.

The old men around the room turned white at the same time. Even the sounds of crying stopped. These men, who possessed prestige and fame outside of this room, were now reduced to just a bunch of old people- they were frightened by what had just happened before their eyes.

"Now, everyone."

The one to break the silence was the very same person who created this terror, Szilard.

"I've read Barnes' memories, and till the very end he still... Yes, even as he was killed by me, he was still revered me, swearing loyalty to me... Truly impressive! I hope everyone will follow Barnes' example."

Evidence of his words were the pile of clothing and shoes that had fallen onto the floorboards.

This speech was a cold joke that simply wouldn't make anyone laugh- Szilard said it very seriously, so of course no one laughed.

"And everyone should rejoice. Barnes rescued two bottles of the 'complete product' from the scene of the fire."

After a moment of silence, this group of old people erupted with a celebratory cheer... the room, initially filled with despair and terror, was, in an instant, brimming with joy.

"But it seems they have been taken."

The joy on all their faces immediately vanished.

"But the location they were taken and the faces of the people who took them, I know. If we are fortunate then we can get it back. "

Cheers sounded again amongst the old men. To them, letting go of this opportunity would mean they would have to truly face

death. To Szilard, who had already obtained immortality, not being able to recover the completed product was just a matter of a longer wait, but this was really a matter of life and death for these aging men.

Standing apart from the excited old men, Szilard pondered other matters.

Even if the 'complete product' was finished, he wouldn't give it to these old men who no longer had any value. If it was someone loyal like Barnes he would consider bestowing it upon them, but unfortunately Barnes was already dead, and killed by his own hands no less.

What I want is not the money or prestige coveted by the common people, but complete loyalty... and knowledge. Only that. With the dawn of the 'complete product'... these garbage have no other uses. They're just ingredients which can increase my knowledge, that's all... Hm. Although it's some useless knowledge, I still like the taste of brain fluid.

While Szilard let this loyal group of 'tools' research the ' complete product', he was engaged in other aspects of research.

It was research on his own 'flesh'. In this process, Szilard came to understand some very important issues... No, he didn't possess full understanding, or at least it hadn't left the 'theoretical' stage yet.

First, the mystery behind the regeneration of flesh... After drinking the wine the person is already dead... No, it's not right to say they died... To put it more accurately, their status of life has changed...

Through various experiments, Szilard postulated that, in the end, it was likely that his indestructible flesh had become an ' aggregate community of organisms'. Even if his own flesh was scattered far apart, those scattered pieces of flesh would still regroup to form the original body...

And on a cellular level, what about... every member?... no, every atom has been 'given life'.

In the past he had also burned an alchemist who wanted to eat him, but the smoke generated didn't drift away with the wind; rather, it rolled back to surround the alchemist and disappeared at the same time as the fire and the regeneration. Even smoke had its own regenerative awareness- this was far beyond the scope of physics.

Since the discovery of the electron in 1897 by the English researcher, Thomson, and the discovery of the nucleus by his disciple Rutherford... mankind began to gain understanding about these sub-atomic particles.

Following their footsteps, it's possible for the discovery of a new type of particle in three years' time... In any case, how far down can this ' living' substance be broken down into?... But then again, perhaps in a hundred years' time, those scientists living in normal society would still be unable to grasp the meaning of 'immortality'... While I continually

experience the laws surpassing today's science... Though I've always doubted whether science can explain the power to summon demons.

And it could be that this kind of wine was not a catalyst to advance science, but a way of 'summoning' the laws of another world into this one? Although he had eaten some colleagues who were leading researchers in this field and conducted research on his own 'complete product', but... seeing this time's success in producing the 'complete product' really made him feel he had hit the bull's eye.

The other matters he researched were this community-body's reasons for 'eating' and 'living by one's true name'. These atoms with awareness of immortality had between them a strong attractive force. That was to say, eating was merging with another sentient being through the right hand. Just like in the world of bees , one hive did not need two queens. Awareness could only exist in one body.

Then the other question about using a false name... ordinary people could easily live under a false name. But if immortals wanted to do that, the moment they signed a false name on a document...

... Why can't I use a false name...? Of course, the demon said it was a ' contract of the mind', but... it seems more like a command coming from every cell in the body. Not from the head, but the feeling of pulses coming directly from the 'shocks' from the body... I'm afraid every atom in every cell exhibits this strong desire... to merge with others of the same kind... So it'd definitely not allow an immortal to hide their real identity...

But those who drank the 'incomplete product' and naively thought they had obtained immortality could live under a false name.

Perhaps that's because the particles think that, because they're a different species from those people, it is not worth merging, so they're just bait... Hee hee hee... this really is a system with a strict hierarchy.

But where did the mass of the people he ate go? There were still many things he didn't understand. Szilard felt frustrated that his knowledge was still incomplete.

If he knew how to brew the 'complete product', then at least he would be one step closer to his goal of knowledge.

But that guy's younger brother knew only half of the recipe.

He came to New York today precisely for the sake of eating that man who knew the full recipe... But in the end it was to no avail. Ah well, he just needed to obtain the 'complete product', then he could analyze the composition of the product.

The order didn't matter. As long as he was able to obtain the ' complete product' and the 'Knowledge'.

Sooner or later I will obtain the complete Knowledge and, at that time, loyalty and wealth will follow... For this goal, I first need to obtain the ' complete product' of the wine of immortality.

All there is to know about the wine of immortality and summoning the demon.

These two pieces of knowledge... the one with these two pieces of knowledge I know not of is that enviable young man...

Where are you hiding?

"And Ennis. There seems to be a man looking for you."

Ennis was a little puzzled by her master's words. She didn't understand what her master was talking about.

"That's right... I can share my knowledge with you... I shall tell you now."

Before he finished his words, Szilard had already placed his left hand on Ennis' head. The old men watched at everything that was happening with wide eyes, while Ennis accepted it silently. After a few moments, a few faces surfaced in the sea of her mind.

The hoodlum foursome. Ennis knew these were the four guys who had taken the 'complete product'. Then the face that emerged: the man who was asking for her. Who was it? Although she felt she had met this man somewhere before, Ennis couldn't remember anything about him.

"... No matter what, bring those four hoodlums back."

"Yes."

Watching Ennis leave the house again, Szilard felt a little worried.

Could the fellow looking for Ennis be a former acquaintance?

No, that wasn't possible. No one should know about Ennis. He had already 'eaten' all the people who knew Ennis's real face. The alchemists who knew Ennis were no longer around either. And even if someone were to attack Ennis unknowingly, it wasn't of any loss to him. In the past, someone mistook Ennis for a normal human being, and accidentally got himself 'eaten' by Szilard.

... It probably started from that time. He still clearly remembered Ennis's hesitation at punishing a comrade. It seemed she had obtained a little too much knowledge.

Ah, never mind. It didn't matter. If she got in the way then he would just eat her.

Killing her was much easier than 'eating' other people.

Ennis' figure disappeared through the exit in the ceiling.

Szilard closed his eyes, the corners of his mouth turned up in a faint smile.

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"Yes... I am Inspector Edward Noah."

Even when saluting, Edward was more imposing than the bureau chief opposite him.

Standing before Edward were two special agents, both members of the 'Bureau of Investigation'. Officially their rank was not higher than the bureau chief, but since he was going to start work with the Bureau from next week, needless to say, the two before him were his seniors. Because he had been aware of this for a long time, the two people were many times more radiant than the bureau chief.

"Ah--... Thank you for your hard work. Eh--... I'm Bill Sullivan. And this is..."

"Donald Brown."

The man to the side reported, interrupting the lanky man's speech. This man was very muscular, and just his fist was larger than Edward's.

He had heard about the situation earlier from his superiors. These two people came here in pursuit of criminals responsible for a string of robberies that occurred across the whole of America. Edward was to cooperate as a local officer.

"Ah--... Looks like you've already heard from your superiors, but I still want to go through it again. Eh---... Please look at this photo first..."

In truth, Edward had only heard his superior say a few words about the ‘serial robber-thief suspects’, so the details of the case could only be learned from these two special agents.

Edward looked at the photo in his hand. On it were a man and a woman wrapped completely from head to toe in bandages. He could tell it was a woman because she wore a wedding dress outside the bandages. And the other had to be a man, because other than bandages he wore nothing. Their entire body except for their eyes and mouths were bound tightly by bandages, so there shouldn’t be any other moral problems.

“.....”

Edward was silent for a few seconds.

Was this the Bureau's idea of a joke?

Seeing Edward’s confused expression, Bill smiled wryly as he explained.

“Eh--... How should I put it? Yes--... We once wondered, are these really the criminals we’re pursuing? But this is definitely material from the precious photo collection of a news reporter. The two seemed very anxious when the photo was taken. Ah--... Right, how to say this...”

Unable to take his colleague’s terrible stutter any longer, Donald continued for him.

"After these guys got photographed they did some robbing business. By the time the police arrived on the scene, the only things left in the alley were their discarded bandages and the wedding dress. Witnesses all said that they only saw 'bandages'. There's practically no useful information."

So that was it was all about- Edward finally understood. Wearing on extravagant costumes during their operations, then changing afterwards. This way, the chances of escaping were very high. Naturally, this unusual method of attention-seeking camouflage was highly successful.

"Besides this, they have at times worn a black mask and a cape, a silk hat and a crutch- in short extremely unique appearances. They've repeatedly committed over eighty cases of robberies and burglaries in this manner."

"Um... why haven't they been caught yet?"

Although Edward knew asking this was rude, he couldn't resist .

"Eh--... how should I put it... Although the victims did suffer losses... they weren't worth investigation by the Bureau... Eh--... In the beginning it was just watches and clocks. Other things were like chocolates, candies... it was only when they stole the door of the main entrance of a museum that they started with things that could be said to hold some value."

Edward couldn't help but feel disheartened. The Bureau would actually search the whole of America for these eccentric criminals.

"But the case that occurred in New Jersey last month was problematic. The entire inheritance of a local wealthy family, the Genoards, was stolen by them.

This was the first time Edward had heard of this.

"... If that was true, then why didn't the newspapers report it?"

"Because the Genoards stopped the news from being released. They said it was shameful to the entire family."

What fools. It was because of these people that so many criminals had escaped from the law. Edward was extremely agitated, but on second thought, he realized that not publishing news in the papers wasn't anything unusual, so he calmed down after a while.

"These incidents didn't stir up any ruckus in the past, so of course they were dropped."

"Aah, that's due to the recent popularity with 'Scarface' and Luciano."

Scarface. Alphonse Capone most famous nickname.

"Ah--... Scarface huh... He came to New York at the peak of his career... That was thirty years ago... Although on recalculation it's been thirty-one years now. When this Brooklyn-born man was still

young, he had already become the 'Public Enemy No. 1' and the big boss... Yeah well, he can be said to be one of the few people in American history to create miracles."

"Let's quit talking about that guy."

It was true that Capone reached the top of the criminal organization at a very tender age. In a sense, not only did he possess talent, he was also hardworking. But Edward refused to acknowledge the abilities and hard work of criminals.

"Mm--... But then again, our government seems to have never acknowledged the fact that 'Mafia exist' in this country... Even Capone is just thought to be 'a simple hoodlum'... Man, ultimately it's us subordinates who have to work our asses off. Ah--... what a pain."

"Bill... Enough chitchat. If those upper-ranks noticed you, your life could easily be ruined."

On hearing his colleague disparage his own superiors, Donald gave a bitter smile as he chided him.

"Oh--... Scary, scary, our superiors are scarier than Capone..."

After a brief smile, Donald's face turned solemn again and he turned to Edward to say,

"Well, that Capone's enemies isn't just us. Those New York Mafia also can't wait to get rid of Capone... That guy's killed too many people."

That was also truth. The few large Mafia in New York were incensed by Capone's behavior. They even assassinated Johnny Torrio, the leader of the stabilizing force in the criminal society... Capone was a man who fought with America and the Mafia at the same time.

Suddenly, Firo's face appeared in Edward's mind. The man who decided to become an executive at a tender age. Was he the same? Was that guy a man who would thrive in the underworld like Capone?

No, he would definitely not allow this situation to pass. Before it happened, he would definitely throw that guy into prison. The Martillo family also had to be destroyed. Yes, he was very young... Precisely for that reason, things could still be changed.

Until then, he would definitely devote all his energy in cooperating with the Bureau.

"------ah-... It's best if we continued talking about the robbers..."

Edward was pulled back to reality. His opponent now was neither a big boss like Capone, nor a small organization like the Martillo. Rather, it was these two strange robbers wrapped from head to toe in bandages.

Edward exhaled, his heart becoming heavier.

<=>

"Hooo. At least it doesn't hurt anymore."

Rubbing the bruise on his arm, Isaac let out a sigh of relief.

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

Although she wasn't experiencing the same pain as Isaac was, Miria still parroted his words.

After the collision with the car, miraculously, the robber duo was all right. They hugged their masks and helmets as they walked through the streets towards Broadway. When pedestrians passing by saw them, they thought they were actors performing in musicals and so not a single person was alarmed by their attire.

"Next time I see that cowardly vehicle, I'll teach it a good lesson !"

"Teach it a good lesson, yup!"

"I'll hit it!"

"Won't your break your hand?"

Miria suddenly asked a serious question. But Isaac wasn't put off.

"Then... I'll hit the driver!"

"How will you get him out of the car?"

"Then... I'll spit on his car!"

"Wow, that's a perfect plan!"

After that, the two entered an empty alley, and began discussing their next 'plan'.

"Well then... Our vacation is about to come to an end."

"That's right!"

"Thinking back, it's been a long time... In the beginning, we were just thieves of time!"

"When we stole the clocks and watches."

"Our biggest heist should be that one... When we stole a museum."

"But in the end it proved to be impossible, right?"

"So, to prevent others from entering... we stole the entrance!"

"That door should be our heaviest collection!"

It seemed no one could stop these two from chatting. Whether their crazy talk was something they were born with or some kind of trance to escape from reality, it was not something an outsider could discern.

"But sometimes we're the bad guys, like stealing little kid's source of nutrition!"

"Stealing the chocolate, right? Those poor kids in those places will definitely starve to death! How pitiful!"

But one would feel sorrier for this duo. When they were young, could they only eat chocolate?... It was kind of depressing.

"But, reflecting on our actions, we've decided to start doing good things from now on... Like most recently, with that."

"With that!"

"Stealing the inheritance of a wealthy family!"

"Thanks to us, there'll be no fighting over the inheritance!"

"We sure have protected one family's peaceful harmony."

"They must be happy now."

It seemed they never dreamed that it would land them with something as large as a Bureau investigation. Or perhaps they never knew there existed an organization called the Bureau of Investigation in the first place.

"That's right! Doing good things makes people feel good, so let's do something good for our last job!"

"How so?"

"We'll steal the Mafia's black money!"

It was a joke taken too far, but luckily there were no passers-by nearby.

“Amaziiiing! Isaac, that’s just like Momotaro!”

“Momotaro--?”

“That’s a Chinese legend. It’s about a ‘’katame’’-wielding[8] guy and his underlings stormed an ogre hideout, and stole all the evil ogres’ treasures!”

Although Miria said a lot of things wrong, the clueless Isaac accepted it all.

“I see, I see, like a dark hero!”

“Isaac, you’re so cool!”

“We shall forever remember those children who died and live a good life.”

In their minds, even the act of stealing chocolate made them proud.

“So cool!”

Just as they continued their idiotic dialog, the four hoodlums from before came from behind them.

Isaac and Miria ducked to one side of the passageway, but the uncaring four hoodlums seemed to have no intention of giving way.

"Oy oy, be careful!"

"Be careful!"

Thus, the turning of the spiral of fate was changed once more.

Dallas Genoard was in a very foul mood.

To start off, there was a burglary at the old man's home in New Jersey last month.

When his grandfather died, he left behind a large inheritance.

His mother had passed away long ago, so there were only three other people remaining in the family- one older brother, a younger sister and a father.

Originally he planned to kill his father then push the blame onto his older brother.

This way, the part of the inheritance that would originally go to his father would be transferred to his name. As for his younger sister, he only had to say a few casual words to get his hands on the inheritance that originally belonged to her.

This plan was perfect. But with what had happened, he was in no mood to savor the thought of this superb plan anymore; although if he were to really put it into action, then it'd be a crime through and through.

On the night he returned home with the intention of executing this plan, the house was the victim of a robbery.

By the time he discovered this, all the servants had been tied up, and inside the safe... the cash, the will and the jewels and the like- everything had been taken away. Until then, none of the security had noticed anything happening.

It appeared this gang of thieves was extremely intelligent. The witnesses' testimonies of 'the criminal was a Caucasian Indian' and the paper strip in the safe saying 'We've taken the source of your misfortune' were always on Dallas' mind, even to this very day.

In the end, unable to implement that perfect plan and without any inheritance, he returned to New York, depressed.

Managing the estates took up a lot of time, and he never had much interest with that piece of cheap, rural land in the first place.. . If he couldn't catch those criminals to get the money back, then surely it wasn't worth taking the risk for just that piece of land?

Rather than worrying about things there, why not return to his own city to do what he wanted to do? To make a deal with his underlings and mug people on the streets, though any money they obtained would be spent by him very quickly.

Then, in the days spent venting his frustration, the old man and. .. that Firo appeared.

--- That damn brat!

Whenever Dallas thought of the face of the brat much younger than him, he ground his teeth in anger.

--- How could we get beaten so badly by just one brat!?

Although it didn't sit well with him, the reality was the four of them together had been done in by one brat.

--- If we had more people... No, if we had a gun...

For someone like him with neither, he needed to think of ways to obtain one of the two. Initially he had thought that, with his reputation, he only needed to say a word to one of the other organizations to control them, but it seemed to be another very big misconception.

In the end, he found himself back on the streets with a bruised body.

--- These low-lives. That brat or the Gandor Family- I'll destroy them sooner or later!

Frustrated, Dallas stalked forward, oblivious to his surroundings. But then again, he normally never cared much about what was around him.

His wrist seemed to have hit something.

Ignoring this, he continued walking forward.

Someone seemed to be shouting something behind him.

Turning, he saw a man and woman in very unusual attire complaining to him.

Dallas started venting his anger on the guy and that woman decided to retaliate.

Neither were aware that this was a crime.

Ennis had located the four targets, but she wasn't sure whether she should take action.

If it were only the four of them then there wouldn't be a problem, but two of the people present weren't included in her targets.

And she seemed to recall seeing these two somewhere before.

When Ennis saw that Japanese helmet in the man's hands, the memory came back very clearly.

These two were the love couple she had hit today while driving.

And for these two to be together with her four targets...

"You bastard!"

One of the hoodlums was pummeling the man in the couple. This tall man had no skill whatsoever, taking a solid punch from

his opponent before falling to the ground with a thud- The three men immediately came up to stomp on him, stomp on him, stomp on him-------

"*Hyaaa*, Isaac----!"

The woman of the couple was restrained in an embrace by the remaining man, her hands behind her back.

It was clear these two were not friends with the four men. But not just that- if this continued it was possible they would be killed.

Ennis quickly scanned the surrounding area. It seemed there was no one else passing through here. Then again, if someone really did report to the police and got those four arrested, it would be a headache for Ennis.

But if she revealed herself, it was very likely she would be remembered by the couple.

After some hesitation, Ennis ended up choosing to step into the alleyway.

An arm's length away. The man embracing Miria noticed her approach.

"... Who're you, sis? You're dressed really strangely..."

His voice trailed off half-way through.

The woman executed a beautiful whirlwind kick in midair, straight towards the man's temple.

When Szilard bestowed various types of 'knowledge' into her, he had also transferred knowledge on combat techniques. This not only allowed her brain to remember the techniques, but every other part of her body also gained an 'understanding'.

Like how her balance was perfect when delivering the whirlwind kick just now, as though the result of thousands of times of practice. It was highly likely that in transmitting his ' knowledge' to her, Szilard also passed on various horse riding, dancing and related types of skills at the same time.

"... What the? Bitch!"

Her foot stopped in mid-air, just as the other three men turned to look in her direction. The man she had kicked was sprawled on the ground, unmoving. The released woman ran towards her lover (?).

Wordlessly, Ennis slowly walked towards Dallas and his crew and launched a fierce punch at the closest man's solar plexus. Then she bent down a little and delivered another powerful blow to the center of the man's torso.

Almost like he was wrapped up by Ennis, the man's body curled up into a ball. Having dealt with the first man, Ennis maintained her speed and rushed towards the next man. Her leg swept out a sliding arc and hooked out the man's foot.

The man, dizzied by the woman's sudden attack, lost his balance to the attack to his feet. Unable to support his body's weight, he involuntarily plumped his bottom onto the ground.

Just as the man thought of standing up, his chin was met with a kick from a woman's shoe. The man's head flung back, but for some reason stopped just before it hit the ground. So the woman's foot attacked a second time. The blow sent the man's skull colliding with the ground with a heavy thunk.

Dallas stared in utter disbelief at everything that passed before his very eyes. The scene that occurred during the day resurfaced in his mind again.

Within less than twenty seconds, all three of his comrades were lying unconscious on the ground.

"... This time... This time it's a woman...!"

Today was a really shitty day. Dallas was thinking, he truly had no chance of victory against this woman before him. His knife had been taken away at the Gandor hideout. But he couldn't possible win with one anyway.

"I un... I understand. We'll let go of these guys. So please let us off!"

Although this was a very shameful line for one of the hoodlum crew to say, the woman didn't seem at all inclined to let them go.

"No, I have business with you."

"Wha...? Ah..., gah...!"

Suddenly, thrust into Dallas' solar plexus was Ennis's fist. In the instant Ennis had ducked down, Dallas thought she had disappeared. With the astonishingly quick strike, Dallas fainted without any last thoughts.

"....."

She surveyed the surroundings silently. All four men were passed out. The couple should have already...

"Amazing! You took care of them by yourself!"

"Amazing!"

... actually didn't run away.

"Thank you, sis! I never thought you would help strangers like us!"

"Thank you!"

At the continuous shower of the duo's thanks, Ennis really wanted to back away to maintain her composure. Because of the guilt from the earlier incident with the car, it was very difficult for her to tell them not to thank her for her aid.

"See, isn't she a hero!?"

"But she's a girl."

"Aah, that's right, that's right... heroine!"

Their way of talking was strange, but they seemed quite happy. Ennis on the other hand was bemused. Then again, this was the first time she had been thanked by someone else since she was created by Szilard.

"Sis, you're our savior! How can we repay you?"

"What do you want us to do!?"

Although they said all that, Ennis was instead lost as to what to do. Would be better to refuse at this point in time? What was appropriate when asking others to do something? This was all ' knowledge' Ennis was not equipped with.

Ennis thought for a while, then tentatively said,

"Um... I want to carry these four people into my car... Can you please help me?"

One person went into the front seat next to the driver, then the unconscious three in the back seat, and the door was closed.

"Yaaaay, we should be done, right?"

"Done, yup!"

"Um... I must really thank you."

"What're you saying! If you say that then we haven't fully repaid you!"

"Then you should give us do something again! Isaac is really powerful!"

The three had been taking a break since carrying the four unconscious men into the car. Ennis had been... thinking about how to 'process' these four. At the same time the couple was pondering the matter of stealing the Mafia's money. Both sides, unaware of each other's thoughts, chatted openly in this idle manner.

"Yes, yes... it was this kind of car that knocked us down and fled like a coward afterwards!"

"That's right!"

"The next time we see this rotten car, we must scratch a few marks on its side with a coin!"

"What about the saliva?"

"Of course we must spit on it!"

If with just this she could repay the deed of fleeing from the crime, then it didn't matter how many times they did it. But while Ennis thought that, there was no way she could say it out loud.

"Oh yes, Sis. What're you planning to do with these four?"

"What're you planning to do?"

"Eh..."

Obviously she couldn't tell them the truth. So Ennis immediately came up with a lie.

"Um... I'm planning to hand them to the police."

Only once the words had left her mouth did Ennis realize she said the wrong thing. Since the police station was nearby, it was highly likely these two victims would come along.

"I see... Then, sorry, we'll have to part here."

"Part here, right?"

"?"

"Just from what happened ... we will be arrested by the police."

"Arrested, yup."

Ennis looked closely at the two before her eyes. They couldn't possibly be criminals, so they had to have run away from home.

"Um... What on earth did you two do?"

"That's right... What was the worst thing that we did?"

"Ummmm... That should be when we killed a lot of children."

Ennis thought they were joking. Children who would starve to death because chocolates were stolen were just a product of their theatrical thinking. If it was a joke then let it be. Or perhaps these two were a joke themselves.

"So we've decided to do something good to repent for our past misdoings."

Maybe Isaac had read too many novels when he was little- his words and actions were always mimicking the plot in those books. Stealing children's chocolates just because 'I want to be a baddie' was a really exaggerated way of thinking.

"Because we did bad things, so this time we must do good things."

Miria was very serious when she said this. But it seemed they thought of 'good things' as stealing inheritances, robbing Mafia of their money and so on. The difference between these acts and 'bad things' was just paper-thin.

"Ah... I see... You two are really strong."

"Eh? Ah, yes, I'm strong!"

"Strong, yeah!"

"Compared to you... I'm useless. I don't dare to face my own crimes..."

Why was she saying such things to people she met for the first time? Ah, perhaps she was afraid... that if she let go of this opportunity, there wouldn't be a second chance to let herself talk like this.

Ennis thought that, but in the end she still wasn't able to say it out loud. Because if she said it, these two people before her would also become involved in her own terrible fate. This may mean death for the two of them.

"What's wrong, big sis? What've you done?"

"I'm a bad guy's friend!"

Friend. Ah, if this is true then it'd be all right. But it's too late. I've committed far too many crimes. Ennis felt a little sad.

When she was created by Szilard, the 'knowledge' she was given was everything Szilard knew about languages, fighting, cooking, driving and so on... All this was the minimal amount of everyday knowledge needed to take care of Szilard's life. And the faces and names she needed to find. There was a young man called Maiza Avaro, as well as alchemists who were past colleagues of Szilard.

Szilard didn't teach Ennis a single thing about ethics or religion. Besides law, driving and money transactions, he didn't teach anything else.

And, most importantly. Szilard taught her the fact that he could easily kill her. Because, when creating her, he had also planted the fear of death deep in Ennis's heart.

She was forbidden to read or even to listen to the radio that was invented after her birth.

Ennis's fate changed when she ate the man who was threatening Szilard's life. That was when she was fighting with the alchemist... As a last resort against alchemists who possessed the same 'immortality' as Szilard and herself, Szilard taught Ennis how to 'eat'. Using one's right hand to absorb the entirety of one's opponent.

The first time she ate someone, Ennis learned very many things. Things she never knew before, little by little, began to filter into her own mind. In that instant, her world was broadened.

She only needed to think a little with that knowledge to fully understand the evil of the things she did and the terror Szilard presented.

But, to this day, what could she do? Even if she felt guilty, those who died could not be revived.

And... if she let Szilard learn of this, the next one to vanish would be herself.

That Szilard was that type of man was something she understood very well.

To eat him first was impossible. Ennis knew this better than anyone else. Long before she ate her opponent, she would have already been done in.

When Ennis learned of the 'eating' between the alchemists, Szilard had once asked her,

"Ah... How is it? Obtaining new knowledge, how do you feel?"

"Yes... There are some things I simply cannot understand."

Ennis could only answer in that manner.

"... Hey, big sis!"

"Big sis!"

Ennis, who suddenly pulled herself out of her reverie, saw the man and woman staring at her worriedly.

"... ah..."

"Are you all right? You looked like you were in a daze."

"In a daze, yup!"

"No... Sorry, I'm fine..."

"Ah, right, about that. We don't know what you did, but you see, didn't you just rescue us? So, the thing about karma, karma."

"That's right. No matter how many bad things bad guys do, he only needs to do one good thing and people will think 'actually, he 's still a good guy'. The world is like that! Isn't Capone the same? He killed a lot of people, illegally made alcohol, was a total evil bastard, but because he also did good things, he is very popular now. He has his own residence in Miami, and is good friends with Dempsey. And now he even has a very beautiful wife!"

But for a saint, one evil deed was enough for others to condemn them as worse than the devil. If 'the world' was used as a standard for judging people, then all that Miria said may be right. But then again, Capone ended up going to the Alcatraz Island prison shortly after to serve his sentence.

"So, you've also helped us, just like that. Didn't you do something that you can be proud of? You'll definitely be popular, you'll live in shockingly expensive places, become friends with boxers and then become lovers with a handsome guy!"

"That's right, that's right, karma, everyone's karma. If you still can't let go of matters, then the more good things you do the better ! This is karma!"

Ennis was baffled by all she heard, but she could sense they were benefactors who were desperately trying to cheer her on. Because she understood this, Ennis felt more uncomfortable.

"Thank you... I need to go now."

Ennis forced a smile, and turned to slip into the driver's seat.

"Ah, yes... That's right... Ah-... I'm, I'm Isaac Dian."

"Um, I'm Miria Harvent!"

At that moment, Ennis didn't understand what they were saying. When she realized they were saying their names, she hurriedly burned them into her memory. Isaac and Miria.

"Ah... I'm... Ennis. No surname... Just Ennis."

"Really, no surname. That's really strange."

"I'll remember it. Ennis, Ennis, Ennis, right?"

She gave a wave to the duo who were grinning like kids, and she switched on the engine.

In the rear mirror, she watched the two figures become smaller and smaller.

They seemed to be shouting something. Ennis listened.

"See yah--!"

"See yah soon--!"

Hearing this, Ennis thought.

She really wanted to meet them again too. Although it was difficult, but if it was possible she would like to see them again.

Though their meeting was brief, she wanted to see them many more times.

When she thought that, Ennis gave a faint... smile. Not a fake smile, but one that came from the depths of her heart.

To smile naturally. This was another first for Ennis.

When she realized that, Ennis silently started to cry.

Twenty minutes later... In Szilard's basement, the four young men were sitting on the ground.

Their hands had been tied to their backs, and, like in a three-legged race, their feet were tied to each other's.

The four woke up one by one, then started cussing and swearing at the surrounding old men. When Dallas opened his eyes at last, the three, already awake, reined back the flow of expletives.

"... Whaz this? What's going on?"

"Well... This is... Dallas, these guys ain't said a thing from the very start, man."

Hearing his comrade's words, Dallas started surveying his surroundings. In the corner of the house sat a circle of old men wearing high-quality suits, watching them from afar. In such an

evil place, there was nothing else especially noteworthy other than the old people sitting around that round table.

"And, Dallas... While we were sleeping, that woman seems t' have injected us with sumthin..."

One of his comrades said uneasily. Perhaps because of the piercing pain, he had woken up and probably saw his comrades being injected. When he heard about the injections, a strong wave of trepidation welled up in Dallas's heart. Exactly what strange substance had been injected into his body?

"How do you feel? ... No, my apologies. We didn't ask before taking you here."

Just as Dallas and his cohorts were shaking and breaking out in cold sweat at their surroundings, a voice suddenly came from behind. Twisting their torsos, they saw an old man wearing a dark brown suit standing behind them. From his aura they could tell he was the pillar of this group of old men.

"From the looks of those three, you should be their leader, am I right?"

"... Who're you, geezer? What're you gonna do with us?"

"Hm? I'm Szilard. I'm planning to inquire about certain matters before I let you die a quick, painless death. Are you satisfied now?"

As the old man spoke, he reached out his hand towards the man next to Dallas.

“What’d you want, bastard!? Wanna kill me? Do it if you can...”

With the old man’s hand on his hand, the man wanted to turn to curse those old guys... but he couldn’t move.

“Ah, of course I shall do it.”

As he replied slowly, Szilard started to ‘eat’.

This had to be a bad dream.

Before Dallas’s eyes, his comrade vanished, just like that. From his feet, his body slowly disappeared like a blanket being rolled up . First, the shoes fell to the floor with a clatter. Then, his ankles, tied to Dallas’s own ankles, also began to make a scrunching sound. The brown trousers too began to slowly deflate from the ankles, just like a leaking balloon.

“Hey... James...”

I thought this guy is James? Huh? Is our relationship so bad that I’m not even sure of his name?

This overwhelming sight had made Dallas’s memories a little chaotic.

“Wait a sec... Hey! Wait! Hey! James can’t disappear!”

Although vocally he wanted to stop Szilard's actions, his body refused to move the slightest bit in that situation.

Before he had even finished his sentence... the crew of four had become three. The empty space next to Dallas seemed to suck in icy gusts of air.

"... Hm. Another person who didn't live a proper life..."

Finished the business of eating, Szilard slowly savored the ' knowledge'.

"Ooh... The wine is... Don't know if it's safe..."

Hearing that, the old men in the room started stirring uneasily.

"Well then, let me ask you... ... Dallas Genoard."

Calmly turning to Dallas, Szilard bent down and spoke softly to his ear.

"Don't you want to make a deal?"

Dallas didn't understand what was being said.

"... Looks like you're still in the state of shock. Then we'll continue this later."

Szilard stood up, shaking his head, then turned around.

"And, that guy's name wasn't James, was it?"

With that, Szilard and the other old people disappeared into another room.

There were now only three people left in this room. One of the men staring blankly into space started crying.

“Dallas... the one who disappeared just now was Scott... James... is me.”

There was no response to that, and there was only the sound of silence between the three.

“Ennis... Outsiders have witnessed your fight.”

Szilard posed the question. In the ‘knowledge’ he had assimilated from Scott, Ennis appeared while they were attacking a couple.

“Yes... If I observed the situation for any longer, it may attract more spectators.”

Ennis promptly uttered a lie.

“How did you deal with those two people?”

“Those two left the scene immediately. When I returned I confirmed that no one was following me.”

“I see... Then there should be no problem, right?”

"Yes."

Szilard's face was expressionless as he issued Ennis his next order.

"Hm... The 'complete product' seems to be in the hideout of the Gandor Mafia. If we were to negotiate, we may have to provide information, which would be bad. Threaten those three... No, give them a reward, and let them help us take it back. Understand?"

"Yes... But we just killed their friend... can we really persuade them?"

"Don't worry about that... From the memories I have just 'eaten' ... I know those guys value their own interests over friendship and its ilk. If we give them money and their lives, they should be more than happy to work for us."

Szilard tapped his temple lightly, smiling faintly.

"Then again, if they learned that they had gained invulnerability to bodily damage, they would be so moved that they'll forget about what happened their friend... In other words, that's the kind of people they are. There is no problem."

"... Yes."

Ennis gave a mechanical bow and left the room swiftly.

The old men who had just witnessed this scene started shouting together angrily.

"Master Szilard!"

"As... As I thought, what was injected earlier... was the incomplete product..."

"Why give those low-life trash...!"

"Shut up."

"..."

A glance from Szilard and, unbelievably, silence was restored.

"Don't worry. It is because of possible conflict with the Mafia. This is purely for the sake of creating some tools. When they're useless, I'll immediately 'eat' them... Unless, you believe you have the strength to win a scuffle against a gang? If that's the case, then please, go ahead."

The old men had nothing to say to that.

At Night

The horizon seen from Manhattan seemed far away. The color of night swathed the entire sky and twinkling stars were beginning to appear. The crystal-clear sky seemed to shatter in an instant as the entire city welcomed the coming of the night. Colorful lights blossomed in the middle of the streets, dispelling the darkness. The light reflecting off the colored bricks gave the streets and avenues a different kind of bustle and liveliness from daytime.

This was a New York that had never experienced the Great Depression. Although the level of activity was hurt, it still hadn't reached the point of no return.

As though anxious for night's arrival, New York's 32,000 odd ' underground bars' awoke and began stirring trouble.

Manhattan's nights embodied the whole of human desire, revealing a completely different side to the everyday.

This is one of the few night clubs managed by the Martillo Family. Found between Little Italy and Chinatown, this small shop was called '*Alveare*'. Following its namesake, the outside of the store looked just like specialty shop for honey. However, there, beyond the counter and through a sturdy door with a porthole, was a speakeasy, the gathering place for people who desired refuge from the eye of law. Both men, women and even sometimes

children, came here for the liquor. This was a place for social gatherings that existed in the niche between public society and the law.

Back then in New York, many underground bars operated like this, putting up a front as a legal business. Hidden in clothing stores, under apothecaries, or even in churches and funeral parlors , there were these existences that slipped through the loopholes of the law.

This '*Alveare*' store was also one of the sanctuaries from the law.

In its basement was an even larger space. Normally, it wouldn't be open if there weren't any customers, however there were ten men gathered there that day. In any case, the number of people was irrelevant for the entire place was enveloped in silence and tension.

The room had no electrical lighting; the only source of illumination was the dazzling glow from the flames of an oil lamp centered on the circular table.

"—Firo Prochainezo—"

The heavy silence was broken. The surrounding men took their respective places circling the round table that took up most of the space in the room. Only the man who just spoke was sitting- the others all stood.

The man who spoke... was the '*capo societa*' of the Martillo Family, Molsa Martillo. Although he looked to be past fifty, he possessed a physique that didn't coincide with his age.

On either side of him were two high-level executives of the organization... the '*primo voto*' responsible for matters within the organization—the Japanese Kanshichirô Yagulma and the '*chiamatore*'—Ronny Suchiato. Maiza, the '*conta è oro*', was standing on Ronny's side, two people away from Molsa.

Although it was not his seniority that won him his office, Yagulma was already sixty-odd years old, and just a glance at him gave one the feel of a Chinatown apothecary.

In contrast, Ronny was still very young, with a pair of fox-like eyes that were narrow and long- this was also his defining feature.

While Camorra was an organization that originated from Italy, Molsa didn't put much weight on the nationalities of its members, so all sorts of people could be found within this organization.

Standing opposite Molsa was Firo, and he responded nervously to the call,

"... Yes, present. I am here, *capo societa*."

"... Will you be able to answer the following questions truthfully?"

"Yes."

After a few seconds of silence, the Q&A session began.

"Do you wish to be a Camorrista?"

"Yes."

"In the faraway motherland, we 'Camorra'... were an organization that was born in an Italian prison. If you decide to join, then you will sometimes be thrown in prison and lose your freedom. You may even lose your life in some unreasonable fight. Do you understand this?"

"Yes."

"Your right foot stands in prison, while your left stands in a coffin. Even so, can you fix your eyes on your road ahead and grasp glory with your right hand?"

"Yes."

"If the need arises, are you willing to end your own life with your left hand?"

"... Yes."

"Firo Prochainezo. If your father killed our friends, can you kill your father to exact revenge for our friends?"

At this question, Firo had to think a little.

Firo never knew his own father. Firo was born and raised in Hell's Kitchen, one of the slums for Italian immigrants. His father

was Italian, his mother an American with British ancestry. His father seemed at the time to be a member of the 'Camorra' in Naples, Italy, but in the end, due to the internal conflict in the Naples branch, the organization had to move to America.

His father was already dead by the time Firo was born. He died of lung cancer.

Firo, who had never seen his father, lost his mother too before his tenth birthday.

Again, due to a lung disease- tuberculosis. His mother, isolated by the people around her, died a lonely death.

In the years that followed, Firo did whatever it took to survive. Back then, he simply didn't have the luxury to differentiate between good and evil. Then, when passing through various blocks of New York, Firo met the '*primo voto*' of the organization, Yagulma. The instant Firo reached out towards this Japanese old man's pocket, his world turned upside down. Although he had been tripped by Yagulma many times afterwards, the first time was the most memorable.

From then on, Firo became affiliated to this organization. To him, all the people in this *Alveare* store were family.

There was no question in Firo's mind as to if this was the place where he belonged.

Because he liked them.

That alone satisfied Firo.

"Yes. If the people who were killed were really my friends, I would stab my father's chest with my knife."

"I see... All right, Firo. What you will be facing is... a spiraling... yes, a massive, spiraling phase of life..."

What followed were statements, not questions. Molsa spoke slowly, in the tone one used on children.

"Ours is a world where, once you step in, you can do nothing but spiral ever downwards, with no hope of ascent. Within, though there are those who will keep grasping hands despite slipping, there are others who will truly take a solid fall into the void at the center of the spiral. Of course, there are always those who are praised as they gracefully descend on parachutes and there are those who simply cut the parachute strings.

We are but small, insignificant characters who walk unceasingly down these winding paths. The approaching destination will be the end of our lives. Whether we plunge to our deaths from falling off those paths, or die due to exhaustion from the walk, or even die a peaceful death in our sleep; in the end, death is the same whichever world you go to. Most people will always lean against the remotest parts of the mountains... well, not knowing whether it exists or not, they will eventually die someplace close to heaven. But it is impossible for us to ascend there.

Perhaps Capone looked like he was climbing this high mountain of life... but in reality he was just making a beautiful descent amidst the people's cheering. It looked like the President's ballet... but in the end it was just a downward sloping path."

At this moment, Molsa stopped, took in a deep breath and continued.

"Someone as dazzling as Capone... fair enough, he was outside of this spiraling path, just as the ordinary folk perceived. But most people don't notice that there's still something they don't know lurking between these downward paths."

Molsa's eyes were wide as he fixed his gaze on Firo's.

"Firo Prochainezo, hear me once more. You can still turn back now. Even if you have committed evil to date, they're nothing special, so you can still climb back onto the rising paths. Or you have done evil in these past few years, but you can still start over again. However, there is no turning back once you enter this world . As a member of the organization, once you become a Camorrista, you will become a commander. This is a part of criminal society... it is a part which allows you to drive the gears of your destiny. If this becomes true, you will truly have no way of turning back. If you want to turn back, then the guys who walked down fate's spiraling paths with you will pull you back with all their might, and push you into the empty heart of the spiral. Honestly speaking , I believe that you will be very successful if you chose to walk down the straight and narrow, because you are very capable, Firo Prochainezo. Even so, do you still wish to walk down this path?"

Molsa finally finished what he had to say, plunging the surroundings once again into silence.

The flame in the lamp flickered strongly.

Firo said the following to answer Molsa's questions. It required immense courage to say such a thing.

"... Yes. I have mentally prepared myself."

In the span of such a short sentence, cold sweat poured down his back like a waterfall and a few drops of sweat fell from his clenched fists.

"... I see... If that's the case, then let us see your determination."

Hearing Molsa's words, Firo took one step forward.

Then, he pulled out his own knife... and stabbed it on the table. It seemed to be a tradition of past 'ceremonies'- around Firo's knife were more than ten knife marks.

In front of the standing knife was a handgun. Firo took up this gun, facing Molsa. Then, he pointed the gun at his own heart.

Having finished this string of actions, Firo circled the round table holding the handgun in this manner. All the half of the men Firo passed by looked at him very seriously.

When he arrived at Molsa's side, Firo knelt down respectfully. He carefully cocked the handgun and silently offered it to his leader.

The *capo societa* wordlessly accepted it, and raised one hand to signal his *chiamatore*, Ronny.

Ronny silently nodded and walked to a rack in the corner of the room. Then, he took two bottles and one glass to Firo's side.

One bottle was full of wine, and in the other, liquid poison sloshed around.

Molsa poured wine into the glass until it was half-full, then proceeded to use poison to fill the rest of the glass.

Without saying anything, Molsa held the glass up before Firo's face.

Firo unhesitatingly took the glass and slowly brought it to his mouth.

The faintly glowing rim touched the youth's lips.

At this moment, Molsa snatched the glass from Firo's hand and dashed it against the floor. Crimson liquid and glass shards scattered at Firo and Molsa's feet.

That action just now demonstrated Firo's mentality and loyalty. Placing the knife on the table meant he would not rely on weapons ; pointing the handgun that Molsa had accepted at himself represented his mentality: 'Rather than let the *capo societa* get attacked, I am willing choose death'; and drinking the poison represented his loyalty: 'If it is the *capo societa*'s will, I am willing to die'. This Camorra organization's 'inauguration ceremony' was

different from the original Camorra's in content and meaning. After the series of ceremonial rites just now, the Martillo family began the final 'ceremony'.

"*Capo societa*... Please test my duty."

Firo said. Molsa nodded his head quietly.

"Yagulma, you will be the supervisor. Maiza, you will test Firo's duty."

He ordered his two subordinates.

In front of the round table was a stretch of wider space. Firo and the two executives walked to the space together, while Ronny brought three knives. The first was the one Firo pulled out just now, which was placed in his hand.

The remaining two knives were held respectively in the two executives' hands.

They... rather, Firo and Maiza began their 'duel'.

The difference between Camorra and Mafia lay in the fact that the Mafia liked using handguns, while Camorra felt that using knives was an indication of a person's 'reputation'. Those who could use knives well would be respected by those around them.

In other words, knowing how to use a knife was also the duty of a Camorra member.

Thus, testing the technique with a knife also became part of the ' ceremony'. Although the meaning may not be the same, this ritual of a 'duel' was common to almost all of the other Camorra organizations in Naples and New York.

This 'duel' was won when one hurt the other's wrist. If Firo was hurt, he would be pitted in a duel with an executive other than Maiza. If he continually lost to three people, then this meant Firo's technique still needed practice, and the duel would be postponed. Of course, this meant he couldn't be promoted to executive until then.

"... There should be no ill-feelings between you, right? If one of you stabs the other in chest, I will kill that person there and then, understood?"

Yagulma announced the rules tonelessly. Although he was an immigrant from Japan, he had lived in America for over 30 years, so his pronunciation and accent weren't the slightest bit off.

Firo and Maiza respectively removed their jackets, and hung them on nearby chairs. Both now wore only white shirts, which were extremely striking in the darkness of the room.

"Not removing your shirts?... Ah well, despite that it's a little chilly, don't you think you'll stain your shit if you get cut? ... Doesn 't matter? Ah, all right... You can begin."

Yagulma took one step back, leaving Firo and Maiza standing, facing each other.

Firo was a little lost as to how to move. Now he thought about it , this was the first time he had seen Maiza hold a knife. Some called him a 'coward' behind his back, but since he was an executive, his knife technique shouldn't be all that bad.

Although he thought that way, it never occurred to Firo that he could lose. If his opponent was Yagulma, he didn't have confidence in winning, but if it were Maiza, he was certain of his victory.

The next instant shattered Firo's naive thoughts.

This tall, lean man before him merely bent down then rushed over. Although his footsteps were slow--

Maiza suddenly extended his arm. It looked like it really did grow longer.

".....!"

Firo immediately leapt back to avoid the attack. Maiza now stood where Firo had been moments ago.

(*He's fast.....!*)

Taking a slow first step then accelerating; that was how there was an illusion of Maiza's body stretching.

Maiza gave a somewhat forced smile, and seamlessly moved his knife to continue his attack.

The knife in his hand underwent all sorts of changes in one attack. His knife would carve out an arc in one attack, then stab out along a straight line the next. Although Firo refused to give in and counterattacked in-between, his opponent's attacks were effectively neutralizing every one of his own. Suddenly, in an instant, the string of continuous attacks would appear once again.

Strong! Maiza's skill with the knife was the best among all the people Firo knew. If he was a bystander observing his actions, he wouldn't help but be impressed, but, of course, this kind of situation wasn't likely to happen in a fight.

Still, Firo was also the best at knives among the *picciotto*s, so he was able to avoid Maiza's attacks, if only by a hair's width.

Firo's strengths lay in being able to visually track fast movements and having a broad field of vision. His eyes therefore weren't only able to catch the movement of the knife's blade. The flexing of Maiza's shoulders, his line of sight, the movement of his footsteps- all these minor details were also captured, and from there Firo could judge what step he himself should take next.

He had always been in charge of monitoring organization-managed casinos for cheating, so his eyes' sensitivity towards movement and his field of vision had all been honed to their peak. During his free time, he would learn wrestling techniques from Yagulma and train his knife skills against Ronny and Molsa, so he had good judgement when fighting.

Even so, Firo was still being pressed in by Maiza.

Firo observed Maiza and the room behind him. From the position of the opposite wall, it wouldn't be long before he would be forced into the corner of the room. If his back were to hit the wall, then it was likely he was going to lose. If that was the case, then he might as well---

Firo decided to take a gamble. He jumped back one large step, so his entire back was against the wall. Maiza also forced to move forward at this moment. Firo quickly lowered his body... then kicked hard against the wall and closed in on Maiza for hand-to-hand combat. Bewilderment flickered across his opponent 's face-- or so Firo thought; he couldn't be sure. The attack ended abruptly, with his knife stabbed towards his opponent's hand.

If he were to cut his opponent's wrist, his opponent might gain the chance to retaliate and cut Firo's wrist first. If that were the case--

Maiza's wrist suddenly froze.

Firo's knife flew out, stabbing right into the hilt of Maiza's blade . The two knives overlapped neatly, but Firo's knife blade was slightly longer, whereas Maiza's blade didn't reach his opponent's hilt.

The cross-counter of fraternal knives. This miraculous sight didn't even last a second.

Maiza hurriedly tried to retract his own knife, but Firo saw this. Matching his breathing to his movement, Firo advanced, seizing the opportunity to push forward with his knife.

This unexpected force shook Maiza's balance.

In that much-awaited instant, Firo swiftly retracted his knife. Without missing a beat, he withdrew the knife tip silently from the hilt of Maiza's knife and quickly grazed Maiza's wrist. .

Only a few seconds of intensive combat, but it ended in such a theatrical manner.

The sleeve of Maiza's white shirt was ripped open, and at its center, crimson blood welled up.

"... Everyone, victory is clear."

Maiza smiled, raising his red-stained wrist high.

After a moment of silence, the basement erupted with cheers.

The executives, who had been watching the 'ceremony' anxiously up until now, had expressions that mirrored those of baseball fans whose team had hit a beautiful home run. Everyone congratulated Firo together.

"Haahaa! You were really amazing, Firo!"

One of the members of the executive placed his hand on Firo's shoulder.

"To think you were able to get a point off that Maiza!"

It seemed all the executives knew about Maiza's abilities. Then again, Firo had never heard any of the executives speaking badly of Maiza behind his back. Until this point, Firo was very calm, but now a cold sweat was breaking out on his face.

"Ah no... even I... am very surprised."

"Congratulations, Firo."

As a show of support to Firo, whose strength had now left him, Maiza gave him a congratulatory embrace. Then, one by one, the whole executive came over to embrace the newly-inaugurated executive.

Patting his back, Yagulma also gave Firo a rare compliment.

"You've grown up. In all my years as Supervisor, you're the first candidate executive to defeat Maiza!"

Lastly, Molsa embraced Firo as he patted his back.

"I don't have to say anything more. You are already a splendid Camorrista, Firo."

Then Molsa held up the gun used earlier in the 'ceremony'.

"To celebrate the birth of a new executive, I will fire a celebratory shot!"

Muzzle to the ceiling, Molsa pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced through the wooden ceiling up to the loft. It seemed the

shot was fired at the same place every time, because the old bullet holes were always around the same area.

Just like that, the entire ceremony ended and a new Camorrista was born.

Being the cause of the festivities, Firo seemed very happy and was looking around non-stop.

"..... oh?"

Until he noticed something.

The crimson stain that was on Maiza's wrist had completely disappeared.

'What's going on here--?' Firo was just thinking, when---

Thud- it sounded as though something fell onto the ceiling. This was followed by a woman's shriek.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Isaac is dead----------!!"

<==>

Let's turn time back.

On the recently-lit streets, Isaac and Miria were casually walking along the road, dressed strangely.

“Oh no--, our dear Ennis, will she really be able to hand over those four to the police?”

“It’ll be good if she can escape afterwards!”

The woman had said she was a criminal and seemed worried that she would be caught by the police.

“Right you are, but what on earth could Ennis have done?”

“Maybe she ran away from home!”

They weren’t aware of it, but Ennis too had thought the same of them.

“I see... That might be it! In that case... she must be really strong.”

“Strong!”

“She should be using the legendary ‘Japanese baritsu’.”

“*Baritsu*? What's that?”

“Hmmmmmmmm, it's the Japanese martial art used by Sherlock Holmes, the main character of that popular British novel! To be precise, it should be the ‘*Burton-ryu jujutsu*’."

“Wow, Isaac knows everything!”

"Hmmmm, looking alone isn't enough. It is only when you closely that you can understand the true meaning of baritsu, Miria-kun."

It seemed he really enjoyed reading detective novels. Even with 'careful observation', you couldn't tell what baritsu was. And in any case he had never seen *baritsu* in the first place.

"But, really, strong women are amazing."

"Like Tomoe Gozen, right?"

Why did these two possess so much uncommon knowledge?

"By the way, Isaac! Where are we going now?"

"Aah, how should I put this..."

Isaac began speaking in a hushed voice.

"Even though we've decided to steal the Mafia's money, if it's too big an organization, there'll be lots of people after us, so wouldn't that be troublesome? In that case, we're going to steal from one small organization that's not part of any alliance! ' Ccording to the information from my earlier investigation... this area should be 'Martillo' and 'Gandor' turf."

"Yup yup."

"That's why the plan is to head to the closest hideout of the Martillo family. On that note, we'll be checking it out today."

"Checking it out!"

<==>

According to the news provided by the information agency, the Martillo hideout was located within a store with a beehive-shaped signboard.

At the center of the brown signboard, written in white paint was the word '*Alveare*', but since Isaac didn't understand Italian, he wasn't aware that it meant 'beehive'.

"Aah, it's here, it's here."

"It's here!"

On pushing open the door, the two smelt a sweet scent.

There was a crowded display of honey jars in the store. While one would think the sweet scent came from within those jars, the source of scent was actually the stove for heating honey behind the register.

"Welcome."

Said the voice of the woman stirring the honey over the stove.

"We're about to close, so if you want something please be quick about it."

Her attitude was frigid and unfeeling, but Isaac and Miria didn't seem to mind as they looked around the store.

Behind the register was a corridor, and further inside seemed to be a very sturdy door.

"Excuu--se me, can we go in through that door?"

"We want to go in!"

The female shopkeeper's reaction to these words was to give them a quick look over.

"..... New faces."

"Pay no mind!"

"No mind!"

The female shopkeep was carefully re-examining these two people's identities. A tuxedo with no necktie and a black dress. In their hands were an outlandish helmet and a strange mask.

They just didn't look like inspectors, and she had never heard of a female decoy used in undercover investigations.

Having judged thus, the female shopkeep silently walked into the corridor.

"Come."

She knocked quite a few times on the firmly shut door, and for a moment light flashed in the peephole.

After a while, a '*clank*' came from behind the door, probably the sound of a padlock being opened.

The door opened, and blinding glow poured out from inside.

"Woah..."

"Amazing..."

Inside was just like the stage of a musical. Lit by hanging chandeliers, the milk-white walls gave off a golden, honey-like glow. The interior was much larger than the store outside, with about 10 round tables covered with white cloth placed within. Just as the room looked completely different from the store, the feel of the room gave off the impression that there would be other hidden rooms.

There was a stage-like construction within the room, likely where divas released their songs and voices. Many electrical light bulbs surrounded the stage.

"Waa, respacted guests, werucome!"

This sentence of broken English came from inside the store.

Coming towards Isaac and Miria was a Chinese girl with beautiful black hair. Gold embroidery on red silk-- the girl was wearing such an eye-catching qipao. Her figure was not in the

slightest bit wasted, with the dress showing off her exquisite curves, enough to attract any man's attention. But there was still a childish quality to her actions and speech, so rather than the bar's Madonna, she should really be described as an idol.

"Aah, aporojize-- today shop booked by someone ersu. So you two prease come dis corna?"

Hearing her words, the two surveyed their surroundings to see there were indeed very few people around. Other than them, there were two elderly people and a child. At the back of the store were only three men.

The Chinese girl didn't wait for the guests' response and took them directly to a small table in the corner.

Of course, Isaac and Miria didn't complain as they sat down. Today was only for scouting the premises, so they didn't particularly mind where they were sat.

"Let's see... First get me a glass of the cheapest wine."

"Get it!"

"Yes, yes. Prease wait a moment!"

They waited until the Chinese waitress had left, then started their quiet, secret discussion.

(Listen up, we've come to look for where the money's kept.)

(Is it a safe?)

(Naturally, naturally. According to the information, their organization's office should be around here somewhere. Once we find that place, the safe's likely to be there.)

(Understood.)

The two stood up, pretending to idly circle around the shop. Their actions were extremely strange, but because there was only that one Chinese girl watching the place, no one noticed the activity on their side.

"Now then... Where to begin... hm?"

Isaac's ear seemed to have picked up some cheering sound from somewhere.

"What do we have here...?"

Listening closely, it seemed to be coming from the wine barrels by their table.

Isaac walked to the wine barrels, and squinted as he peered inside.

One sweep of the place yielded nothing, but the cheering noise was definitely coming from here.

"...hm?"

His gaze fell onto the shadows of the barrels, where a few holes had penetrated the floorboards.

"What's this?"

Isaac had to push the wine barrel to one side to look down through the small hole in the floorboards.

A sliver of light from electrical bulbs shone through. The hole seemed to be connected to the basement.

And the cheering sound definitely came from this hole.

"Haha--... Could it be the office is underground?"

Just as Isaac was about to look for the entrance came the Chinese girl's cry.

"Aah---! Customer! Dere cannot! Dangerous! Quick, get out off dere-----!"

Hearing this voice, all the customers in the shop turned to look this way. Even Miria had a bewildered expression as she headed towards him.

"Eh...? What's so dangerous.....?"

Bang

From the floorboards came a dry, crisp sound. Then, he felt the tip of his shoe shake.

"Wha.....?"

He looked, and found there was a hole in the front of his shoe. Although there was nothing wrong with his toes, smoke was coming from the hole in the shoe.

Stupefied, Isaac lifted his head to look at the ceiling.

There was a newly punched hole.

"Eh... I... was shot?"

With that sentence, *wham*- Isaac fell to the ground.

Miria, who had watched the entire process from beginning to end, turned stark white and let out a scream.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee, Isaac is dead----------!!"

<==>

"To the birth of a new Camorrista... a toast!"

Molsa taking the lead, everyone inside the shop raised their glasses high.

The executives, having finished the 'ceremony', surrounded the newly born executive to celebrate. Other than the executives, no other members of the organization came today. The *picciotto di sgarro* and '*picciotto d' honore*' were all busy in other bars and casinos, so there was only those who were tightly linked with the executive... or at least, that should have been the case.

"Goodness, I seriously thought I'd died back then!"

"Seriously thought so!"

So why were there two strange outsiders of the organization like them at the celebration? The tuxedo and dress were very appropriate attire for a celebration like this. But why were they sitting together with Firo, the real cause of the celebration?

Back then, when all the present members hurriedly climbed up the stairs, they found Isaac on the floor showing only the whites of his eyes and Miria, who was shouting tearfully "Murder---!". At that, Maiza and Firo couldn't help but say 'Ah', as though they knew both people... or so an outsider may have thought. Because Isaac was almost killed when the bullet was fired, the other executives didn't mind treating those two to a drink of wine.

"... It can't be- the two people we met at the hat shop...?"

"Even if it's a coincidence, this is still too uncanny."

Firo and Maiza exchanged looks with wry smiles. If they'd have known the chaos they were about to accidentally involve those two in, then they probably wouldn't have been able to smile as they did then.

"My sincere apologies, customers. I never thought someone would move those wine barrels."

Molsa bowed his head as he apologized.

"Eh? Ah, that, no, no, it's fine, it's fine! The hole in my shoe can probably be repaired with just some spit and a quick polish!"

"... No, it can't be repaired."

An elderly person... or even just a higher-class person like Molsa apologizing made Isaac feel a little lost about what to do. Miria, on the other hand, had already started helping herself to pinches of the served dishes.

The dishes seemed to all be cooked by the ladies who brought them: the female store owner, Sena, and the waitress, Lia Linshan. Although the dishes were cooked in just the underground bar, a lot of attention had been put into these dishes. There were a variety of Italian dishes cooked using butter and Chinese stir-fry with copious quantities of oil and seasoning- all kinds of dishes from different cuisines were mixed together.

Besides the bright electrical bulbs in the store, there were also many oil lamps, and the light cast by those flickering flames brought out the dishes' deliciousness.

And among the dishes, the most tantalizing one was the duck, placed at the center of the tables. The entire duck had been deep fried, cooked with the shop's famous honey then deep fried again.

Miria just touched the surface of the duck with a knife, and, with an indescribable '*crik*' sound, the juice gushed forth from the broken skin.

"Wow, delicious!"

Hearing Miria's praise, Lia lit up with a happy expression. The two ladies' child-like smiles brightened the entire table.

Around that time, the executives Randy and Pezzo returned.

"Hey, Firo. The wine just now... is it already finished?"

"Oh--, I only bought a little."

"What's with that?... Wine is the most important thing. It's my beloved, you know."

"Ah no, I was originally planning to buy more in other stores, but then there was a fire on the way... I couldn't help but take a look at the ruckus, so in the end I just..."

Firo didn't mention his search for the female driver. But he really did look, so Firo wasn't really lying.

Suddenly, Randy and Pezzo's expressions took a turn for the worse.

"Huh? What's the matter, you two?"

"Ah... No... Nothing. Right, Pezzo?"

"Yeah... Don't hit me!"

"?"

At the forced smiles on those two's faces, Sena, who was serving the dishes, whapped them upside their heads.

"Honestly, what're you two talking about! If you really want to drink wine, then just drink in this shop. Firo, you too. It's your own celebratory wine, so why go out of the way to buy it from other shops!"

Faced with a Sena who had raised her eyebrows in anger, Firo just gave a light shrug.

"Uh, no... You see, Ms. Sena... all the wine in this store is mixed with honey... Since this is such a rare opportunity, everyone wanted to drink stronger alcohol, like adults."

"Huh! From what *I* see, you're still just a kid."

With that, she shook her head and went back to fetch more dishes.

In this store, whether it was wine or beer, honey would be added, so every type of alcohol was extremely sweet. Although the regulars enjoyed this unique taste as well as the dishes made by the two women, it was true that this shop had fewer customers compared to other shops.

But this store of this size was still able to operate mainly because it did not need to pay a 'protection fee' to the Martillo or bribe the police, Prohibition-enforcing officers, or even the politicians and the governing bodies and the like.

As the governor of this area, Edward had never accepted bribes nor did he ever yield to his superiors' pressure. That is to say, bribery alone didn't work in this area. The governor was a man

who could see through deceptions, so every time he solved a matter he never needed to arrest anyone.

If it was an ordinary store, its taxes added up to 500 dollars. Because of this, the appeal of an underground bar was that there was no need to pay a wine tax, thus a lot of money could be earned ... The end result was that prices at stores which paid taxes prior to the Prohibition Act became cheaper.

This meant the thirty thousand underground bars on this street also fell into this spiraling, changing destiny.

And the Great Depression caused liquor prices to plunge, delivering an enormous shock to the development of the whole spiral. Amidst all this, this store could be said to be one of the lucky exceptions to have escaped this strange spiral.

This lucky wine store was filled with the bright, lively atmosphere of the outlaws' wine fest.

"But Firo, you really are amazing... being able to defeat Maiza."

"Oh no, it was just luck. Besides, if it came down to ability alone , I'm afraid I would have been defeated early on."

"Heh, so that's how it is! And the road from now will become tougher, so be well prepared!"

"Wow."

"If it were us... we'd grab the opponent's wrist and give him an over-the-shoulder throw..."

"If I did it that way then I won't be using knife techniques."

"...hm? No more pepper..."

"Can't believe there's such a large, round table in the basement. How did they get it in?"

"Oy, someone help me look for some pepper?"

"Huh? Firo, didn't you buy four bottles of high quality red wine ?"

"... Nah, just two bottles."

"Ah, Miria, I 'd like to have some of that duck, too."

"Mm! Yes, ah-- "

"... Woah, yummy. But Miria's is still more delicious."

"Do you mean in terms of taste or presentation? You..."

"Wow! I never dreamed Isaac would praise me!"

"Man, why is it I always want to hit you two?"

"Oy---! Pepper--- who---"

"Hmph, when the opportunity comes, I will gift my opponent with a flying kick!"

"That's why, that isn't called using knives."

"Originally this country was very cold to us Japanese, and also the Chinese. Even immigrants don't bother hiding their disgust for us Japanese..."

"Mr. Yagulma, you're jumping from one topic to the next like crazy... are you drunk?"

"Oh dear... that table there also doesn't have pepper."

"It was brought in when this house was being built, before they sealed off the ceiling."

"What'd you say?"

"The round table! Didn't you just ask, Pezzo?"

"Ah, Randy, Randy."

"Yeah, Maiza--?"

"Is there no performance today? That... you see, that guy with the burnt glove."

Spew sputter

"Ewwww, Pezzo and Randy spitting out saliva!"

"How disgusting!"

"Ah, sorry, sorry... got a little too excited today..."

“Oy, Ronny. Where's the pepper...”

“Just bear with it, boss.”

At this moment, everyone didn't know who was talking to whom. Seeing this chaotic party, Firo was extremely happy.

Ever since he was born, Firo rarely smiled. Those poor immigrants like him also rarely smiled... or rather, they simply had no reason to smile.

To be able to smile happily like those Italians who appeared in movies and stories- that was Firo's dream ever since he was little.

Now his wish had finally been granted. To be able to continue living on like this would just be perfect.

Although he knew very well this was a very foolish way of thinking.

But if such a foolish dream really came true, it would be enough to make Firo very happy.

One side of the spiral's path shone with dazzling light.

The other side, naturally, was encompassed in darkness.

Three men were walking the darkness between the noisy streets .

This was a jazz hall with a 'Closed' sign hanging on its door. Normally, this place would be very busy, but because the three people in charge weren't in tonight, the only thing they could do was to close temporarily.

Pushing open this door revealed a man within.

“Aah, sorry. We're closed for the night...”

One of the three men swung his arm out horizontally at that man's neck.

“Un... ah....-----, ----------, ----------?”

Within moments, air leaked from the man’s throat. At the same time, a crimson fluid gushed out.

The knife-wielder immediately pulled the door to cover himself, avoiding the fountain of blood.

When blood stopped flowing, the now-dead man slumped down... Dallas Genoard silently kicked the man to one side. With the man's torso as the center, crimson blood slowly spread from under his body.

“... The basement. Listen here, first verify the wooden crate's location. And... it's not just the box-- there's also the things inside.”

Dallas' held a blood-stained knife in his hand.

And the two men following behind him- held in their coats were the latest models of machine gun.

"Oy... What're you doing?"

When Dallas and the other two came to the basement, four Gandor members were sitting there. They seemed to be playing poker around the round table at the center.

Dallas expressionlessly answered,

"Ah, no... only during the day, we forgot something here... We asked the person upstairs, and he said we could come here to look for it..."

"Forgotten something.....? Aah, are you talking about that wooden box?"

Following the man's gaze, the three people saw a very sturdy safe... and on it was the aforementioned wooden box.

"Aah... Yes, it's that box."

"Sorry, but I can't be sure whether it's really your box... You'll have to wait until tomorrow, when Mr. Luck is back."

At this moment, one of the Gandors softly mumbled,

"About that... Mike should also know about the box, right?"

The 'Mike' he was talking about was the guy whose throat had been cut.

The corner of Dallas's mouth lifted a little. He raised his hand to signal his comrades.

The two people behind him gave similar smiles and drew out their sub-machine guns from inside their coat.

This sub-machine gun was affectionately nicknamed the Tommy Gun by the gangs.

Victory was already decided. Couldn't be... only a three-people organization? It was in that instant the four hesitated. It was already too late.

"See yah, you flunkies whose names we don't know."

"...You bastards! What'd you do to Mike!"

Before the Gandor members' hands touched their guns at their waists, their opponent's machine guns were already spitting tongues of fire.

Dozens of bullets were fired from the two machine guns, flying straight into the four members' bodies.

This massacre lasted only some seconds. The sound of gunfire in this basement was enough to shatter the three people present. The wooden tables in the house, the large vases on the wall shelves ... everything was thoroughly destroyed.

“Ha, ha, ha.... hahahahahahaahahahaaaa... haha... Is this all you've got? Hey, no wonder they're called trash... this is too funny. ”

Dallas laughed wildly, a red hole visible on his forehead.

“..... Ha...?”

The dozens of bullets were obviously not enough to kill the fourth man. He survived by using the other three as cover and now knelt on the floor, firing at the three attackers. With only six bullets, one of the attackers had instantly died from a shot to his forehead, and the remaining two were also hit in their stomach, hugging their sub-machine guns and groaning.

The lucky survivor snatched up the gun from his comrade's hand and emptied the cartridge. Half of the remaining two’s brains were blown out. Seeing this scene, he finally gave a sigh of relief.

“The- the hell...”

Before him, the friends he was just playing poker with were all lying on the floorboards. One of the men's fingers had also been broken, so even if he lived it was unlikely he could play poker ever again.

“The fuck, why? You scumbags---!”

Shouting, he hurled his own gun at the attackers' corpses.

After taking in a deep breath, he slowly stood up. His legs were shaking uncontrollably, there was simply no way he could walk.

"... Telephone... in any case.... gotta contact Mr. Luck...."

The telephone was on the wall on the attackers' side, so it was spared from the machine guns.

"Mr Luck's... seemed to be... ah..."

On his shoulder, a hand appeared.

"....."

Terror seized up his entire body.

"... Mike.....?"

He struggled to quash his fear and turned his head, then suddenly a knife appeared in his own forehead.

"... Does it hurt?"

Dallas used one foot to kick aside the man collapsed on the floorboards as he cheerfully asked the question.

"We're really immortal... this is amazing... it really is... Aah, this is amazing!"

The bullet hole in Dallas's head had completely vanished, and not even a drop of blood that once stained his clothes could be seen.

"How exasperating..."

"Exasperating!"

"They were such a nice crowd..."

"Such a nice crowd!"

Isaac and Miria were strolling aimlessly along the night streets. Having eaten their fill at the rowdy party, they had wanted to say their goodbyes and leave... but every single person at the party wouldn't let them go, and even said things like 'take a souvenir' and gave them a bottle of honey as they were leaving.

"If we were to take these good people's money, then we'll definitely be doing something bad."

"We'll be villains!"

So the two headed towards their other target- the 'Gandor Family' headquarters- to have a peep...

"Look, that building over there."

"That building, huh!"

"But it's a little too quiet..."

Looking from the distance, there seemed to be some movement around the entrance.

From within the building emerged the silhouettes of three men.

Isaac and Miria quickly hid in the buildings' shadows to watch everything that was happening.

The dimness of the streets made it impossible to make out the others' faces clearly. But it was clear the men opposite were carrying what appeared to be a box very carefully. They stood at the building's entrance, discussing something, and from the look of things they didn't seem to have any intention of leaving at the moment.

"Ah---... There it is. That must be the organization's money."

"Really? Why're they moving it? Isn't that place safer?"

"It must be... you know, the bribes for the police. In this kind of darkness, three people watchfully transporting something together ... it has to be money, right?"

"I see. Isaac is really a genius!"

"I know, right?... If that's the case, then there's only one thing left to do and that is... to steal the money now."

"Why?"

"If they're moving the money out today, then when we're robbing tomorrow there'll be nothing in the safe."

"I see! Isaac, you're brilliant!"

The wheels of fortune continued to advance quietly along its spiraling path.

"Hey, if we take it away just like this... will we really earn some cash?"

"We can only hope so."

"But, Dallas... you also saw Scott killed... when they're through usin' us, will we also get killed...?"

"'d be best if we forget about Scott... Relax. They really want this wine. Right?"

"Yeah."

"So, we only need to point our guns at this wine... we'll just say we won't give it to them if we don't get the money..."

"I see."

They didn't know this threat was useless against the all-powerful Szilard.

Just as the three people were about to leave, they saw a black shadow blocking their way. A tall man wearing a strange mask on his face... The strangest thing was the V-shaped, knife-like ornament on the hat on his head.

"..... Who's there.....?"

Even if Dallas and his cohorts had gained indestructible flesh, they were still bewildered by the sight before them.

"..... Just call me Professor Moriarty! That's right, I have returned alive from the Reichenback Falls!"

It seems Isaac really enjoyed Conan Doyle's works. But the Moriarty in the books never spoke in that manner, nor would he ever wear helmets or masks.

"Eh---... As evidence, you can see this is honey from the bees reared by Holmes."

He took out a bottle full of yellow honey. The souvenir from the Martillo shop earlier.

"..... Are you fucking kiddin' me?"

"No? ..... Ah--, then Jack the Ripper will do."

"You fuckin' around with us?"

"You guys are really stubborn aren't you... who should I be, then? The evil owner Uncle Tom? Or the Wicked Witch in 'The Wizard of Oz'? That would never work, I'm a man!"

All the characters Isaac just mentioned were from famous Broadway musicals. He seemed unexpectedly well-versed in this area, so perhaps he was born into a good family.

"Shut up, we don't have time to take care of you lunatics!"

Knives were drawn to threaten Isaac. At this moment, the focus of the three's attention were all drawn to the man before them.

"Then, what about me?"

Hearing the voice from behind, the three quickly turned around to look.

And something showered down on their faces.

"Arghhh"

They hastily turned back, but at this moment, Isaac threw out the same thing.

"My eyes are..... haa..... ba-ba-..... baa... bast....."

What showered down was a powder of pepper mixed with ash. Although only a fist-sized amount of this stuff, it was sufficient

enough to cause significant damage to their vision and breathing. By the way, it was borrowed during the meal, so there was more than enough pepper.

The three couldn't stop coughing and breathing became extremely difficult. Even with an indestructible body, there was still no way of avoiding the pain.

Unable to take it any more, they opened their mouths to breath. But the result was to inhale the remaining particles of powder lingering in the air, and they once again fell into the same cycle of agony.

Dallas and his cohorts were simply incapable of drawing out their weapons, clutching their throats painfully as they rolled around on the ground.

Isaac and Miria took the opportunity to snatch up the wooden box and vanished from the scene like smoke.

In the end, Dallas and his comrades never found out the two people just now were the duo they met during the day.

Ennis also ran over, and she was very troubled by what she saw .

This was because Ennis had received Szilard's order of 'If by any chance they dared to drink my wine then kill them'.

About 50m from the Gandor hideout, she hid in a shadow in the opposite direction of Isaac, monitoring them...

Just now she saw a tall shadow blocking the way in front of the three men, then immediately from behind a small shadow rushed in and threw something. Then, Dallas and the other two suddenly gave out cries of agony. The two shadows snatched the Dallas and his crew, and, without stopping, ran towards the streets.

“What’s going on...?”

To pursue the two who snatched the boxes, or to save Dallas and his crew. Ennis hesitated for a moment, but then she remembered that since Dallas and his crew won’t die, so she gave chase in the direction of the wooden box.

Ennis leapt over Dallas and his crew, who had fallen onto the floor, and headed in the direction of the box.

On rushing out of the alleyway, she found that although some lights were still shining through several windows, there were already a few people on the streets. Worse though, there was no sign of those two people.

Ennis looked around two, three times, and walked towards the nearest alleyway. Actually there was still quite a distance between the alleyway she just exited and the next alleyway. From what she'd seen, the two were moving very quickly, so if they escaped

into a nearby store then following them was out of question. However, seeing that most stores had ‘closed’ signs hanging on their doors, there was little cause for concern.

Resolved to her task, Ennis started to search the alleys one by one.

A few minutes later, she discovered something strange in the corner of an alleyway.

Among the things in the garbage dump, there were some unwanted items that were still new and very expensive.

Judging from their state, they hadn’t been disposed off long ago .

“Helmet... mask?”

Next to these things was a discarded tuxedo jacket.

To Ennis, these were enough clues. Now that she thought about it, she seemed to have seen the two similar to the shadows she saw somewhere.

“It can’t be...!”

Ennis was stunned as she reached her conclusion.

Her search was over for now.

"What... what what what the hee---ll!!!!!"

At the sight of the destruction before his eyes, Berga went berserk.

In the middle of the night, dozens of police went to meet up with the three Gandor brothers, who had gone straight home.

When they heard the police report they rushed to the scene. And there lay the corpses of those who were both subordinates and friends.

"....."

The eldest brother said nothing as he stared at the sorrowful sight.

"Who..... Just who would do this....."

Even the ever-present, faint smile had completely vanished from the youngest brother's face.

As though trying to blast away the stench of blood hanging in the room, Berga let out a shout that shook the entire building.

"I'll kill him..... I don't care who he is! I'll definitely kill him----!"

A large number of the police present heard this 'declaration to kill', but no one dared to stop him.

The Second Day

With the rising sun, the streets of New York unveiled themselves in the light, showing their real face behind the gleam and glamour of night-life.

On this day, the skies remained sunny from the morning light. The increasingly cold weather changed one's impression of the sky , from crystal-clear to resembling translucent, wintry ice.

"How aggravating..."

"Aggravating!"

Isaac and Miria were once again vexed.

"Can't be... wine, can it?"

"Wine!"

The wooden box they had stolen last night. Exactly what was this treasure of the Mafia? Given its weight, the stacks of bills must have been bound very tightly... At the time, they were bursting with anticipation and dreams about the fruits of their labor. Which turned out to be this.

"Why did they need three people for just 2 bottles of wine... and transport it in the middle of the night, no less?"

"Maybe they wanted to drink it at home, so they were bringing it back?"

"Let's stop regretting this. This is the reward we sacrificed the helmet, mask and tuxedo to get our hands on."

He ended up having to throw away even his tuxedo. Miria obviously couldn't remove her dress, but she changed her clothes. That black dress was placed inside the suitcase.

Now the two were dressed up as a Father and a nun. Neither could possibly be particularly noticed by people on the streets.

"..... That's it, this must be high-class wine! Protected by the dragon, the legendary wine that only gods can drink!"

"Amazing!"

This was actually not far from the truth.

"Now then... what should we do with this?"

"Drink it?"

"Hurm--... Drinking all this is a bit... two bottles is far too much for just us..."

"Then, sell it?"

"Can we sell it though...? We need professionals to analyze it for that kind of stuff..."

At this point, Isaac suddenly thought of something.

"I've got it! We can give it to the Martillos! As a present in return for the honey."

"I see! Oh, everyone will definitely be very happy! Something other than honey-mixed alcohol!"

"With this, it'll definitely be a 'good deed'."

"Mm! The children who died can also ascend to heaven!"

Speaking as though they've won something, these two walked towards the '*Alveare*'.

<==>

In the end, Ennis didn't return to Szilard's side. After some consideration, she decided to find those two and ask them a few questions. Her search had been going on since she saw them at the incident.

Of course, looking for two people you've only just met in a city as large as New York was difficult.

"If this continues... Master Szilard will..."

Even if she went back now it was already too late- Szilard would mercilessly 'kill' her. And even if she hid on the other side of the world, he would easily find her, then kill her anyway.

Aah, did something like gods really exist? If they did, how did one solicit help from them?

Ennis pondered over these things in her heart, then suddenly saw a Fatherly face at the end of the street.

This face seemed really familiar to Ennis.

If gods really existed, if they truly controlled all the people's destinies... then this god was too astute by far... and far too merciless and cold.

"Aah, good morning, Mr. Maiza."

Close to noon, Firo made his appearance at the *Alveare*.

Although yesterday's party went on until very late, there wasn't a slightest trace of a hangover or fatigue in Firo today.

"Morning. How's it? It's a new start for you."

"Don't really feel anything... or maybe I should say I started from scratch yesterday."

Today was Firo's break. It had already been decided that Firo would be responsible for one of the casinos from tomorrow on.

Firo had woken up early to drop by and greet that casino's workers, and because there wasn't anything special going on and he wanted lunch, he went to the *Alveare*.

He had just sat down to eat... when, from outside the bar's entrance, the sound of knocking came from the door linked to the honey store.

At this time of day, all the liquor had been stored elsewhere, so there was no worry about sudden raids by the police. As such, Firo was not the slightest bit nervous as he stood up and walked to open the door.

But he never imagined the ones to enter would be a Father and a nun.

"Look, they're here, they're here, the good people!"

"Good people!"

The two were spouting words that didn't match up with their appearance. Firo had the feeling he had met them somewhere before.

"Ah... um---, Isaac and... Miria?"

"Absolutely spot on!"

"Spot on!"

"... I didn't know you were a Father..."

"Eh? I've never been a Father...?"

"You're not?"

"..... Huh?"

Seeing the expressions of disbelief, Firo's head started to hurt a little.

"We brought some wine today as thanks for the gift yesterday... Ah, well, although we don't know what kind of wine it is, it should be quite good."

"Quite good!"

"What's... this?"

Seeing the wooden box, Firo's hand slowly came to a stop.

He had seen this box before. When he saw what was inside, he became more certain.

This was the box the arrogant old man was holding. And---

Raising her voice and calling them on the streets was a little rude, so she just followed them.

Then, disguised as Father and nun, Isaac and Miria walked into a honey specialist store.

She watched the entrance for a long while, but they still didn't come out.

"What should I do...?"

Ennis decided to enter the shop. At that moment, she noticed a group of people coming out from the store, so she hurriedly moved away from the front of the store.

From the distance, she spied four men and women emerging from within. Two were Isaac and Miria. And...

When she saw the other two's faces, her heart almost stopped.

These two men were familiar to her indeed.

No, it was actually the first time they've 'met'. But in the ' knowledge' Szilard had previously imparted to her was information about these two people.

One of them was Szilard's former colleague. And he was also the 'Alchemist' whose knowledge Szilard coveted, Maiza Avaro.

The other one... although she didn't know his name, he was the youth who had been asking around for her.

The four exchanged brief farewells, then Isaac and Miria left while Maiza and the youth walked back into the store.

"I really don't understand what happened... After Isaac and Miria left..."

The man with Maiza. He had been investigating about her all that time; could it be because Maiza already knew about her existence, so he let his accomplice ask around?

She wasn't sure about Isaac's relationship with them. Had Isaac been tricked and used by them?

In any case, after Szilard 'ate' Maiza, she only had to help Isaac and Miria stall for time so they could escape.

This woman never once thought that 'she met Isaac, Miria, Maiza and his accomplice only because they were searching for her'. While extreme coincidence was required for this to occur... the main reason the thought never ocurred to her was because Ennis herself was very fond of this eccentric couple.

That was all.

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"Ennis, explain. Where did you go and what happened to the ' complete product'?"

When she returned to the building at Grand Central, no one other than Szilard was there.

Those old men were all people with a certain level of status, so it wasn't possible to leave their positions for a few days in a row. Some came because they couldn't wait for the 'complete product' to arrive, and likewise there were some who were unable to stand Szilard's gaze and fled the scene.

There was no sign of Dallas or his cohorts. Well, they couldn't have come back. If they did then it was likely they were already in Szilard's right hand.

Ennis gave a simple recount of all that had happened. She concealed the matter about Isaac, and just said Maiza had taken the wine.

"... Maiza!"

The effect of these words were instantaneous. Szilard's mind was now preoccupied only with the thoughts about Maiza. It seemed Isaac and Miria were safe.

"... Take the car out, Ennis. I will go straight to where he is... As for Maiza, if I don't 'eat' him then there is no meaning in me staying in this world... ku... kuhahahaha! Though I don't know if the knowledge of my existence is a hindrance to that guy, but that' s all right! I'll just have to 'eat' him. Hurry, Ennis! If others should taste the 'complete product,' then 'eating' will become troublesome !"

"Just as you said... if that Maiza really knows about us, then it's very possible that he'll let more of his friends drink that complete product..."

"No, you don't have to worry about that. That guy originally hated 'immortality' more than anyone else! If he discovers the '

complete product' that grants immortality, he would definitely smash it there and then... But even if it is smashed it won't hurt or itch me!"

This was 'knowledge' Ennis had not obtained from the alchemist she once 'ate'. She knew that Maiza only survived because he suddenly awoke when Szilard was killing his friend ... that was all.

"... Bring a gun. This time you are permitted to be as violent as you like. If necessary, it doesn't matter even if you have to kill everyone in New York."

Although on the surface his words didn't seem serious, but when she compared him to the normally baffling Szilard... this Szilard definitely seemed livelier than before.

Ennis found this all the more terrifying.

The wheel of destiny that progresses along the spiraling path. These tremors could lead to a complete derailment.

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"What's th' matter, Dallas..."

"Chill! ..... Anyway, we better think about how we're going to leave this city."

Dallas and his cohorts had gone to a bar they didn't usually frequent. The completed product had been taken in the pepper battle. If they went back they would definitely be eaten in the blink of an eye. It would be troublesome fighting him, given knives and guns weren't of much use against the guy called Szilard.

"... Even if we're gonna leave this city... we also need t' plan what needs doing before we take off..."

"What needs doin'?"

"Y'know... Like killing that brat, the so-called Firo!"

<==>

The police force had finally disappeared from the Gandor Family's office.

"Aaaaaaaah! Fuuuuuuuuuuck!"

Berga, who had not spoken for a long time, slammed the nearest stool onto the floor.

With a dry, breaking sound, fragments of wood flew everywhere.

Luck caught one of the fragments in his hand and said,

"Calm down, Berga-bro... breaking all the chairs won't help the situation."

"Calm down, my ass! You can't possibly expect me to be as calm as you!"

"If you can't calm down, then who'll take revenge for Mike?... I may look calm, but I'm actually very angry too."

Luck squeezed the wooden fragment very hard. Blood trickled down from between his fingers.

"Yes, I am feeling very angry indeed. It may seem contradictory to be calmly angry, but being constantly angry just won't work. How can we quench our anger? I've been considering this problem since a while ago, but no matter how I spin it I can only come up with one answer. Revenge. It may be quite a foolish answer. Regardless, I've been thinking; once we find the bastards who killed Mike and the others, should we hand them over to the police or take care of them ourselves? I really want to rip them to pieces with my own hands. Aah, saying this means I'm still not really calm now. Still, if I don't keep reflecting over this, I'm afraid I'd have grabbed a gun and run out to find the offender long ago, or even done in all the poor citizens and police who got in the way.

So, I'm begging you. If that really happens, Berga-bro, please, hit me, shoot me- you must stop me at any cost. Like I said... I think this is a bad idea, and all I can do is hope that my older brothers will calm down."

In the span of the entire speech, Luck's expression never once changed.

"..... I see ... I'm sorry, Luck. But you do need to calm down, more so than us."

Sensing the burning rage in his younger brother, Berga finally calmed down.

"..."

Keith silently watched his younger brothers. He seemed to have something on his mind, but nothing could be deduced from his permanent poker-face.

"... In any case, I think the neighboring gangs are definitely going to be suspicious about the police's visit today... Naturally, reporting this to those gangs would be good... as both information and a warning, I suppose..."

Luck quietly stated the arrangements for here on. Either way, they had to start with the neighboring gangs.

"Alright... first go to the Martillos' place. If a small organization like us was attacked, then they might be the next target, or they may even know something about this..."

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"Now then... It brings a tear to the eye, us leaving this city."

"Escape, right?"

The robber-duo were strolling in the direction of the station for trains leaving the city.

"In any case, there sure are lots of police around."

"Lots!"

The police couldn't possibly be looking for them, right? Their disguises were perfect, and they also didn't let them see their own faces.

Among the crowd of police officers was a man issuing orders, and when the police dispersed, the two approached to ask,

"Excuse me, did something happen?"

The man who was being questioned... Inspector Edward Noah gave a little nod in the direction of the man who looked like a Father, and gave a brief outline of what had happened.

"Father, it's... no... you may already know about this, but there was a gang battle last night... Quite a few Gandor people were killed."

Edward only repeated what had been said in the papers. Perhaps if the other person was not a Father, Edward wouldn't even have looked at him.

"Father, I have sinned. I always thought it was better if more of those guys died in their squabbles. But when I see those pitiful bodies... I feel the same as when I see ordinary citizens' bodies, and

I find myself hating those killers... Though those corpses have been steeped in the crimson blood of violence, I still pray that they'll be at peace after death..."

Having said that, Edward quickly departed from the scene.

Left behind were the two people with looks of despair.

Gandor people had been killed. These words were the only sound echoing in their ears.

"... What... What should we do! I never thought they'd die!"

"Ah..... aaah..... Was it too much pepper?....."

These two were completely, utterly and extremely wrong. They had always thought Dallas and his cohorts were Gandors, which was why they thought they had killed them with pepper.

"Aaah... If that's the case, then how can we ever face those dead children...?"

"And Ennis too..."

"I never thought it'd be this serious..."

"Aaa--h!

At this moment, Miria exclaimed.

"Wh-wh-what is it?"

"What, what if, Isaac-- Firo and the others have already taken that box, and if the police or the Gandors find it...?"

"..... !!"

Then it wouldn't be them, but rather Firo and the others who would be arrested.

In other words, the possibility of escaping from this city now was high if they let things be... But this thought never crossed their minds.

Because giving away something one stole wasn't right in the first place.

"What a disaster...!"

"We have to go back!"

The Father and nun ran.

The fates that were, at one point, plucked out of the spiral.

Without anyone noticing, they were sucked in once again.

"Hey, those two people just now..."

Because Edward was following up something urgent, Ronald and Bill investigated alone.

It was then a man and a woman ran past in front of them, with heights matching those described in the reports.

“Ah--... Hold on, could it've been... those two?”

“What should we do?”

“Hm--... Let’s put it aside for now. Anyway, we'd better head off to Grand Central first. That’s where our real mission lies... Once we’re done with that side, we’ll drop by Edward’s for a chat.”

“... So it seems.”

“Ah--... You know, lying to Edward is somewhat unfair to him.”

The spiral’s currents sped up.

The tip of the spiral gradually contracted, eventually focusing on a certain end point.

The spiraling stairs of destiny. On the stairs propped up by the ‘ Wine of Immortality’, various destinies started to turn like the wheels of a car.

Together, their movement caused the spiraling tower to start to sway.

As though the spiraling tower wanted to collapse itself.

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“What’s wrong, Firo? Your expression’s been a bit off for a while now...”

Behind a heavy door in *Alveare*, Maiza and the others were eating a simple lunch. Other executives besides Firo and Maiza were gathered in the shop. People outside of the executive were forbidden from entering, so there were no *picciotto*s to be seen.

“Ah... no.....”

“Is it something to do with the wine and the wooden box?”

Pointing the wooden box on the table with his fork, Maiza enquired concernedly.

“Ah... no..... The coincidences keep happening or something.....”

“Coincidences?”

“Meeting Isaac and Miria again counts as one. And what they brought along, too...”

Just as Firo was about to explain, the doors opened with a large crash.

Everyone in the bar turned their heads to this sound.

There stood an old gentleman. It was a face no one recognized.

No one except one man: Maiza.

"..... Szilard ....."

"It's been a long time, Maiza Avaro! Or should we say it's been more than two hundred years!"

"Listen..... Forget the other guys... We only have to kill that brat then escape... Well, since we have Thompsons here, we can kill 'em all when escaping, so we won't have to worry afterwards... Hahha. .."

As they walked along the road towards the *Alveare*, Dallas and the other two checked the gunpowder in the Tommy guns. Together with the drum magazines, they still had 100 bullets left.

"By the way, Dallas... The 'Martillo Family' that brat's part of, is it really at that hideout?"

"Mmhmm... I paid for this news at the information agency... If that brat isn't there then, we'll just wipe out this Martillo Family then go back. Then leave the brat a message written in blood, saying 'next time it'll be you'..."

"Haha, then we'd be just like that Jack the Ripper?"

"Old-fashioned tactics are perfect against those old-fashioned guys... haha..."

In the shadow under the worn eaves, the three entered a dim alleyway. Because there were too many police on the streets, they decided to come here to avoid attention. Of course, if they were discovered they were fully prepared to kill the police and innocent passers-by on the streets. No, rather than being mentally prepared for this possibility, it'd be more accurate to say they actually hoped it would happen.

It was good that there was no one in the alleyway, so they could at least check their machine guns in peace.

"Now then... this is the final matter to be settled this city. Put your all into this, we don't wanna end up like some kinda unemployed beggar on the streets, yeah?"

"Hahaha... Begging ain't bad- that beggar recently was very amusing, wasn't he..."

"Aah, you're talking about that guy who had flowers in a paper bag? That guy should've made lotsa profit."

"Eh, Dallas, ferget about begging... What's it again? Didn't you say something like 'nowadays you can make more money robbin' than begging'?"

"Now we're really going to be robbers... hahha... hahahahhahhaha..."

The spiral of fate gradually contracted. This was not by chance, but rather, it was inevitable.

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"... Ro-robbers... we-, were they talking about us just now?"

"Doesn't seem like it... Because those voices just now came from the other side of the wall."

Isaac and Miria were pacing back and forth in a construction site. Just as they were puzzling over 'how should we explain it to them?', they realized they had already lost their way.

"B-but... could it be the police..."

"I'll have a look."

Scaling the wall using a tin drum, Miria stealthily looked to the other side of the wall.

"...!"

Shocked, she was about to scramble down when Isaac also jumped up, and the drum made a '*clank clank clank*' noise as it shook.

"Eh eh eh, how is it?"

"It's those guys! Those guys! The ones who beat up Isaac yesterday... The guys Ennis took care of and handed over to the police! Even though there's one less person, there's no mistake!"

Isaac and Miria didn't realize they were the very same people they had attacked last night.

"... Really?"

"Yeah!"

After thinking a little, Isaac reached a conclusion.

"I see... I get it!"

"W-what?"

"They must have broken out of jail!"

"Woaaah, that's some serious crime!"

"That must be it... they're back for revenge on Ennis..."

"That's terrible! Ennis will be killed!"

Miria screamed as her face turned white.

"Relax, isn't Ennis strong? No matter how many times those guys---"

"Nono, no!"

"?"

"Because because, those guys... were holding machine guns!"

Hearing this, even Isaac's face paled.

"..... You're kidding right....."

It was very likely Ennis would die. His hero... no, heroine was going to be killed. But what could he do?

"You know, I... yesterday, I was almost killed by those hoodlums..."

"Huh?"

"But you know, Ennis saved me, so Ennis is my hero."

"Mine too..."

"You know, heroes... can't die... they can't die."

"..."

Seeing Isaac's contemplative look, Miria quietly took in a deep breath.

"... Holmes, killed by hoodlums who escaped from prison... Conan Doyle never wrote about this kind of stuff... He didn't write it, did he?"

"... Isaac...?"

"Of course... That'd be pointless. If that happened Holmes' fans would be sad. If he was killed, just like that, then won't his arch enemy and rival, Moriarty, become meaningless?... Those guys can 't possibly do those sorts of things. Right? Miria."

"..... Mm."

Although his reasoning was nonsense, he had tried his hardest. He was searching hard for the right words to encourage himself.

"Our hero... no... heroine... to repay our debt of gratitude, we must do something. Right, Miria?... Even if we can't become good people... at least, Ennis..."

"If we don't help her we'd be no good!"

Without waiting to listen to the last of Isaac's words, Miria was already chasing after Dallas and his cohorts, pulling on Isaac's hand as she went.

"He... Heeeeeeeeey, wait a sec, only I can g-g-go... L-l-l-look, they're all holding machine guns so you might might might die... *gulp*!"

Talking and being pulled along in a run caused Isaac to accidentally bit his tongue.

He covered his mouth and thought,

(*Aah, being together with Miria is just too wonderful.*)

Thinking that, he grinned as though amused by something.

A Father and nun ran down the brick-walled streets.

Without crosses.

And without any knowledge of prayers.

Even so, they still wished to save someone.

Maiza shook as he stared at the old man. Surprised by his reaction, Firo asked,

"... Um... What kind of weird stuff are you talking about, grandpa... you two know each other...?"

Firo eyed the old man with extreme suspicion, then glanced behind him... there, in the corridor that connected to the honey store, he saw a familiar figure on the ground.

"... Miss Sena? ... Wait... Miss Sena!"

Firo immediately shot up from his seat without thinking. Seeing Firo's expression, all the other executives also stood up. In an instant, the air in the bar was thrumming with tension.

The old man didn't seem to mind the mood as he smiled joyfully.

"..... Ha-haa! Relax, Maiza. And you, nameless cannon fodder... I just knocked down that girl, that's all. But I may have been a bit heavy handed, so the first one or two vertebra of her spine might have broken..."

"..... You bastard! I'll kill you!"

Randy, sitting in the corner of the room, slammed the table in anger. Pezzo also pounded the table with one fat hand. The impact sent all the dishes flying, and they smashed against the ground.

"My, my... there're still seven vertebra left, so is it really necessary to raise such a big fuss over breaking just one or two?"

The old man gave a taunting laugh. Not just Randy, but all the other executives including Firo were furious, and they all reached inside their jackets as they stepped towards the old man.

"Please wait!"

Maiza's shout stopped their advance.

It seemed unlikely, but sweat was beading down Maiza's forehead.

"Everyone... I'm the only person he's looking for... I'll take care of him personally, so please leave this place through the back door. .."

"Mr. Maiza...?"

"Oy... What're you saying, Maiza!"

After a moment's hesitation, Maiza revealed a little of his history with Szilard.

"This man is the one responsible for... my friends'... and my younger brother's... deaths."

With those words, the entire room was plunged into silence. And the one who shattered the silence was Szilard himself.

"Then I 'ate' another five people... so it should be eighteen to be precise! Fuhahahahaha!"

"..... Szilard..."

Only Firo, who was by Maiza's side, noticed something. Anxiety and grimness showed on Maiza's face, emotions Firo had never seen him express in the five years he had known that man.

When he saw the burning fury in Maiza's eyes, Firo was at a loss of what to do... at the same time the flames of anger also raged in Firo's heart.

"Mr. Maiza... I don't understand what's going on but... Putting it simply, this guy is Mr. Maiza's enemy, am I right?..."

"..... In that case, he's our enemy too."

Randy followed on from Firo's words, and flipped the switch that started the battle.

As he finished saying those words, Randy pulled out a handgun from under his jacket and fired at Szilard's body.

A sharp staccato sounded as a single red hole pierced Szilard's right chest.

Then, one hole became two.

"Damn right, the moment he attacked Sena he became our enemy, right? Randy?"

The person saying these words was Pezzo, who was holding a still-smoking handgun.

"Anyway, this kind of old shithead would only rust our knives.. ."

"Be careful not to hit Sena..."

Seeing the old man still hadn't fallen, the other executives quickly pulled their triggers.

Unafraid of prison or just venting their pent-up rage... none of them were the slightest bit uncertain about their actions.

The crisp gun shots resounded in the store.

"It's useless... guns have no effect on him..."

Maiza's voice was lost in the thunder of the echoes.

Only when all the members had used up their ammunition did the rain of bullets stop.

The bullets that passed through Szilard's body or were off-target peppered the lavishly decorated, grand walls, turning it into something that looked like the inner wall of a public toilet in the Bronx.

"..... Oy..... Maiza..."

Randy waved his knife around as he asked.

"Why's... that old man's still standing?..."

Szilard's torso was covered in holes. But his mouth once again curved into a big grin.

When he saw his expression, Maiza shouted the answer at the top of his voice,

"I'll tell you the reason later, just escape for now!"

Too late.

Szilard's hand had already reached towards his feet. Placed there was a black case. It was a high-quality case, large enough to hold a tenor saxophone.

"My, my... Getting rid of the pain is really tough... If I really passed out from that, then invulnerability becomes pointless...

He smiled as he squatted, and opened the case with a snap.

Among all the people in the room, only very few could guess what was going to come out of the case.

So despite Maiza's warning, not a single person had any intention of escaping.

"If you hit my spine or my head, I mightn't be able to move for a short period of time... Ah well, I can't thank you enough for aiming at my heart... But then again, I can avoid any shots at my head."

The first person to realize what was inside was Firo, who immediately lunged forward.

In the instant Firo closed the gap between them, he kicked away the case Szilard opened. He then twisted his body to kick Szilard in the face.

"Young, aren't you...?"

His leg was blocked by Szilard's arm.

"Hmph... Youth. It's what angers me the most."

Just as Firo lost his balance, Szilard's foot struck him in his abdomen.

"Gaah..."

Just like that, Firo was subdued as he was sent flying back to his original place... beside Maiza.

"Firo... As the *conta è oro*, I order you..."

Supporting Firo, who was about to collapse, Maiza issued an order.

"You will escape from the back door... No... Report what has happened here to the Don and the secretary!"

Even if told to escape, Firo wasn't the type to run away. When Maiza considered this point, he immediately issued this 'order'.

"B-but, Mr Maiza..."

"..... It's all right... I'm not planning to die any time soon..."

---Not before killing Szilard— Maiza didn't finish the sentence.

"... I understand!"

Although for a moment he was torn by indecision, just one glance at Maiza's eyes was enough to make Firo dash out the door.

... At that moment, all hatred had disappeared from Maiza's eyes... he just tranquilly smiled.

That gaze was one of preparation and determination. If someone inside the organization had that kind of look in his eyes, whether his intentions were right or not... no matter what one did

it was useless. Do as he said, because the only way to stop him would be to kill him yourself. It was a simple case of choosing one of two options.

So Firo decided to trust in Maiza's determination, as kicked hard against the wooden floorboards and ran out in one breath.

"I want to escape? Well, it's all right but... Szilard, you'd go to any lengths to 'eat' me, right? Whether it be my flesh... or my spirit ."

Grinning exultantly, Szilard lifted something from the black case.

"... Hey, hey..... Is this for real....?"

-said someone among the executives.

Firo ran towards the back door. Behind him, Szilard pointed the military-issue submachine gun towards him. There was no hesitation whatsoever as he pulled the trigger.

Hearing the thunderous gunfire coming from behind, Firo instinctively wanted to duck for cover- but onslaught never came. So Firo's resolve not to turn back hardened and he disappeared into the corridor linked to the back door.

"... You're really baffling. Is that youngster really that important ?"

Standing before Szilard, who had a look of complete disbelief on his face, and blocking the gun fire was Maiza. His body was

wrecked with the pain of the countless bullet holes, and crimson fluid gushed forth like a fountain.

"... The bullets that went through didn't even reach that youngster... Hmph, so it's the quality of the bullets... Or perhaps that's the limit of this gun?"

Showing no special interest in Maiza's state, Szilard started sizing up the gun in his hand, wreathed in the light smoke coming from the muzzle.

"Maiza!"

"I'm... all..... right..... quick..... escape..... plea..... se."

"How can we escape when a friend is injured, stupid Maiza! If we'll all gang up on that guy, there's no way he can't not die!"

As he spoke, Randy grabbed a round chair by its leg and hurled it at Szilard.

"Oof... huh?"

The first chair was evaded with a light twist of his torso, but this was followed by a second chair thrown by Pezzo. At the same time , the other executives too started throwing chairs at him.

When Szilard judged it was impossible even for him to continue avoiding the chairs, he had no choice but to block with his hands. Szilard's arms started whirling around rapidly.

With this opening, Randy, Pezzo and a few other executives had closed in.

If everyone moved in together the direction of the attack would be confused, but if everyone moved it one at a time it would be too time-consuming.

"I'll get you!"

Randy brandished his knife as he flew at him. Szilard's response to this was only to step back a little to avoid him.

The executives approaching from the front didn't notice that Randy's entry position had created a blind spot in Szilard's field of vision, such that he couldn't see Randy. It was a corner of the narrow corridor.

"It must be hard for you, you nameless sacrifices."

"You...!"

The attack didn't stop as all the men pressed forward in a line.

At this moment, the machine gun made an abrupt noise.

A breath's moment later, following the lead of Pezzo, whose entire front of his body was stained bright red, quite a few executives collapsed around the entrance of the room. To prevent Pezzo and the others' attack, Szilard pointed the machine gun

downwards and swept the floor with gunfire. Then, he pointed the muzzle at the remaining executives in the room. After some deafening gunfire, the magnificent bar that once epitomized the Prohibition era was turned into ruins mirroring the aftermath of the Civil War.

"You're fucking kidding me... Shit..."

That Randy was fortunate enough to avoid being honeycombed was because he had quickly hidden himself behind the wall. The inside of the corridor was Szilard's blind spot.

"..... Oy... Pezzo..... You sunnova bitch..."

Seeing his friend's corpse lying on the floor down the corridor, Randy fought to keep himself calm and slowly drew himself closer towards the corridor. Knife in hand, he prepared to cut down with his knife the instant he saw Szilard's face... Although he knew it was very difficult to accomplish, at least he had some kind of plan of action in mind.

Suddenly, a silhouette flew out down the corridor.

"----------!"

Randy brandished his knife... then froze in that position.

What flew out... no, what Szilard had *thrown out* was the sightlessly staring body of Sena, her head lolling around limply.

In the instant he stiffened, a bullet hole appeared in the back of the falling Sena.

Wanting to shout something, Randy cavorted his death dance in a spray of blood mist to the sound of gunfire.

All this happened just as Maiza's regeneration finished... truly the events of that night were nothing short of a macabre comedy.

<==>

Immediately as he opened the door to the store, Firo was assaulted by the undeniable feeling that something was wrong.

With no time to pinpoint the source of the feeling, he hastily took a step backwards.

Just then— something whizzed past before his eyes like a guillotine blade.

It was a few seconds before he realized this was the raised leg of a person. Then, his gaze turned towards the owner of the leg.

"You..."

Firo had definitely seen this face before... no, rather, he had seen the attire before.

"The one yesterday ..."

"You're..."

Ennis also noticed that the other person's face was very familiar, and so halted her attacking hands.

Thanks to 'Barnes' knowledge' from Szilard, she knew he was the man who was looking for her. Although she knew nothing else about him, she couldn't help but stop herself.

Szilard had said 'If Maiza escapes from the back door, stop him' , so when the door opened she automatically attacked... but it seemed he had seen through her kick when the shadow from her foot fell on his face. Moreover, it had to be this man.

After a little thought, Ennis decided to start attacking once again. This man was probably Szilard's enemy. If she let him escape her own life may be forfeit.

But at this moment, Isaac and Miria's faces came to mind. If Szilard was to order her to kill Isaac and Miria, what would she do ?

"Woah, wait a minute!"

After a few seconds, the woman before him resumed her ferocious attack.

Although he dodged the first blow expertly, he turned around only to be greeted by another two consecutive attacks as Ennis landed a clean hit on Firo's shoulder with her other foot.

The fiercer-than-anticipated attacks drove Firo back until he was pushed up against the wall. The same time he felt the light impact of the attacks, the cold brick wall touched his back.

"Mm... I was careless..."

Ennis didn't stop and threw a punch at him.

Aah, this was very similar to the Japanese martial art Yagulma taught us. When Firo thought that, he automatically used the moves he'd practiced with Yagulma.

"And so-"

His right hand shot out and caught Ennis's right wrist. Although her speed was not to be trifled with, Firo could clearly follow her when compared to Yagulma... and because her wrist was more slender than a man's, it was easier to hold.

Ennis's eyes widened a little.

"- I said-"

Keeping his left hand held high, he pulled Ennis's body close while turning his back. Just like in a dance, Firo's body slipped through under Ennis's arm... and in an instant their two bodies were aligned.

"-'wait', didn't I?"

Then, wrestling to keep a hold on her wrists, Firo used his leg to force the already leaning body towards the floor. The result was that Firo was bending down... facing Ennis, whose back was lightly touching the ground.

And Ennis's right hand was still in Firo's grip. This meant no matter how she writhed, she would still be restrained by the youth before her eyes. Or at least no 'knowledge' within Ennis's mind could tell her how to free herself. This youth possessed ' knowledge' of fighting techniques that she didn't possess.

With a calm expression, Firo asked the woman,

"... Explain yourself. Are you related to that old man inside? Why did he come here, and why can't guns kill him? And most importantly... who are you?"

Ennis was a little surprised to hear that. This man knew nothing about her. And not just that, but even about Maiza and Szilard. ... Then why was he looking for her?

"Come on, I'm practically begging you... I really don't know a thing. Aren't I just an idiot, the way I am now?"

Knowing absolutely nothing... just like herself a long time ago. It was as though Ennis's world before she 'ate' the alchemist had been revived. Not being given more than only the barest minimum of knowledge. When she thought back to that time, Ennis felt ill

even though the current situation had nothing to do with her. The pain of ignorance was only something that could be felt after one knew everything.

"... You won't regret this?"

"... Huh?"

"Once you know... you can't turn back... Do you really want to know?"

For a few breaths, there was utter silence. After a little consideration, Firo started to answer.

"Huh... It's just like what was said in the 'ceremony' yesterday... "

"... Eh?"

"Tell me. I don't know if I'll have regrets, but I'm very good at forgetting things... I'm stupid, see."

Having said that, he released Ennis's right wrist and straightened himself up.

For a moment, Ennis was a little dumbfounded, then stood up with a disbelieving face.

"... It never crossed your mind I would escape?"

Her direct gaze never left Firo's eyes.

As expected, it was a few moments before Firo replied. Under different circumstances... if these two people met in an ordinary encounter, his cheeks would probably be flushed bright red.

“Don’t worry about it... I’m stupid, that’s all there is to it.”

“You are truly a foolish man, Maiza.”

Szilard regarded Maiza with a pitying look.

In the bar filled with the stench of blood, only two people remained standing- Szilard and Maiza.

“I surpass you by far...”

The amiable smile and courteous speech had vanished completely from Maiza now.

“Back then... when you succeeded in summoning the ‘demon’ on that ship, I should’ve killed you and stolen your right...”

In contrast, Szilard remained cool and collected. Although his opponent was also an ‘immortal’ like himself, Szilard never doubted the absolute advantage he held.

Aware of the fury triggered by tragic scene around him, Maiza struggled to suppress his emotions as he searched for the right words. He had to choose them carefully is he wished to get out of this unfavourable situation.

"The 'demon' would... if I died, he'll return home without fail... That guy'll keep his word on this matter, if nothing else..."

"Ha! From the way you speak it's almost like the 'demon' is your friend. You, who pursued the art of alchemy relentlessly- in the end, you turned your back on the path of science and started using 'magic'... and as if that wasn't enough for you, you even summoned a 'demon'... and this demon even said the following to us thirty companions... 'I will give you the Knowledge'!"

Szilard was just like the vocal actor for a silent film, speaking with the tone of one who had personally witnessed everything.

"You were one of us too... Cut the crap..."

"You said 'I want to understand immortality'. Once you received that wine-like elixir, you shared it for everyone to drink... that was the beginning of this life. And you knew the 'elixir of immortality's recipe'! In other words, you had gained the right to spread 'immortality' to the world!"

Speaking loudly, Szilard seemed like he was praising Maiza's laudable achievements, but in an instant he shook his head and the volume of his speech dropped.

"... But..... the very next day, you started saying something along the lines of sealing the method of producing the 'Elixir of Immortality'. ... Now let me hear your reasons for doing so, Maiza. Originally I thought you wanted to monopolize the production... but it seems you actually loathe 'immortality' itself..."

Faced with the raised questions, Maiza spoke slowly to persuade him.

"One of them is that... this kind of immortality has some drawbacks..."

"Drawbacks?"

"This kind of immortality... will end when one is 'eaten' by others who possess the same ability..."

"Hmph... this is a system kindly created by the demon, is it not?"

"No... Of course, this is true only if you hate that person... But it causes even those in love to 'kill each other', just like a 'demonic' system.... Think about it and you'll see that, even for you, there exists those who can kill you... in other words, our other friends and I were always thinking about 'preparations to settle matters', right? Just like that. Those who have surpassed death from old age fear 'death' even more than average people, right? In other words, everyone wants to become 'that last person'. Should that type of person appear, shadows of suspicion would swell, so naturally immortals would kill each other without fail, correct?"

"....."

"Even those in love... in their eternal time, they may very well feel that they 'want to know everything about one's partner'... If

they truly love them... then the simplest way... is 'to know everything about one's lover'... In other words, 'eat' to fully learn everything about one's lover... a temptation none can resist..."

"With these kinds of fools, just let them eat each other to death."

"I wonder... Or maybe that kind of thinking nowadays is foolish . But after 'immortality' has been spread... after it has pervaded the entire world, this world's moral principles, religion, and even laws will change completely. In that time, another concern arises... 'If I accept all of the other person's knowledge, then they will live on in me'... If the future world evolves into that naturally, I wouldn't mind. But I refuse to let it be a product of my actions. Because I still like this world, that's why."

"..... Hmph. In that case, you can relax. I won't bestow this power on those fools..."

"And the biggest reason being----"

Maiza spoke over Szilard, asserting,

"---Because there are guys like you."

"---Master Szilard, to increase his own 'knowledge', started ' eating' the alchemists who were originally his companions... But he mixed up Maiza and his younger brother and 'ate' his brother--- after that, Master Szilard was trapped by the remaining survivors and thrown into the sea... The surviving alchemists sailed to New

York... And Master Szilard did not die, but relentlessly pursued them to the shores of America..."

Firo was completely captivated by the 'knowledge' Ennis spoke of. As someone who had never even heard of alchemists, he wouldn't have believed in the wacky talk about immortality and such had he not seen Szilard, covered in bullet holes and still laughing.

Then blood disappearing from Maiza's wrist last night was also due to this. Firo puzzled out her words bit by bit as he listened attentively.

"... Please, stop calling that guy 'master'. What are you to him?"

Ennis's face became increasingly somber.

"... I am... Szilard himself. I suppose one could say that."

"To start off... why do you want to know how to make the immortality elixir? This just increases the number of people who can kill you..."

Maintaining a fixed distance between Szilard and himself, Maiza raised a very obvious question.

"... Paracelsus' homunculus can only survive in flasks."

"......?"

Maiza had heard of the name 'Paracelsus' before. The ' homunculus' said to be born from man's hands. Created by the world-famous alchemist Paracelsus and the size of a flask, it was a little man who could only survive in that flask.

But then, after Paracelsus passed away from cancer, that little man also disappeared.

"A perfect homunculus born from knowledge must innately possess all the knowledge from birth... Naturally, in my search for the 'complete knowledge', man-made life was born... For something outside of your field of expertise, this level should be comprehensible, yes?"

In contrast to Maiza, Szilard spun his words lightly like usual.

"This really isn't my speciality, but... in the 'eaten' knowledge, great leaps of progress have been made in this field of research... And I have made use of it..."

Maiza wasn't aware that one of the alchemists aboard that ship was conducting such research.

What was more important to Maiza was that knowledge ... no, that a man like Szilard had eaten someone possessing such knowledge, which tipped the odds further against him.

Uncaring of Maiza's hateful gaze, Szilard cheerfully continued his exposition.

"The little one born in the flask... furthermore, a man-made life that would die if the source of human blood is taken away: the homunculus. Extremely delicate creatures, don't you think? This is the charity I thought of— to bestow the power of immortality upon the weak and others."

Suddenly, a bullet-ridden chair leg shattered. At the sudden sound, Szilard glanced a little in that direction.

Maiza seized that moment and his right hand shot out and crossed the gap between them.

"You're a really naive fellow."

As though he had anticipated the attack, the submachine gun Szilard carried moved quickly. A twist of the body caused Maiza's right wrist to be caught... and a sound not normally heard resounded in the room.

Crunch.

"In the 'knowledge' Szilard had obtained was the homunculus... There was knowledge regarding man-made life. To put it simply... it is the way a human can be born without male and female reproduction... I am made up of cells from Szilard's immortal body and... female cells... from an abducted female around the same age

as I am now... Then I was created by catalysing the two types of cells... He proceeded a significantly different way from Paracelsus' s original method of production..."

She rested for a breath here, then continued speaking in Firo's direction.

"Originally those cells should immediately return to Szilard's body..... But when I was made, 'failed' wine was used as a culture fluid and I was grown in the culture tank* until I was the same age as my mother... After that, my growth stopped since I had the same composition as Szilard..."

- Growth tank? Artificial womb? Lit trans: 'nurturing machine'

"..... ah--... In other words?"

"As a colony detached from the main colony, I can receive knowledge from Szilard. On the other hand, Szilard can separate the female cell constituents in my cells from Szilard's immortal cell constituents..."

"Wait, wait, wait. My brain is a little slow... Can you say it simply?"

Firo complained, resting his head on a hand.

"If we think of Szilard as a company's head quarters... I am a branch office. If you think of every worker as an intelligent colony. .. then the headquarters can cause me, the branch office manager, to become unemployed any time..."

"... So what you've said, in other words...?"

"...In other words, Szilard's will is sufficient to cause my death..."

For the first time, an angry expression crossed Firo's face.

"The hell... There's no way something like that can happen!"

"To Szilard, I suppose I'm like his daughter..."

"What kind of parent would kill their daughter at a whim and to use it as a threat to get her to work! It's all right, you're so beautiful there's no way you're the daughter of that shady-looking old geezer- your faces don't look the same. I can guarantee that... well, in any case, don't worry."

"Eh? ... But..."

"It's fine, so don't worry! In any case, that geezer should probably have been given a thorough beating by Mr. Maiza and the others..."

The two's conversation was interrupted.

"On a date in broad daylight, huh... As expected, brats nowadays do things differently, huh?"

Firo and Ennis turned to see a few familiar faces.

"Ah... Yesterday's..."

"Dallas... Why're you here?"

Like Firo, Ennis was surprised to see them.

"My, my... Big sis', even you're here... This is convenient."

They saw the two people behind Dallas, holding machine guns.

"... the hell's this?"

"Now that you've seen it you understand, don't you... Machine guns. Hahhaha..."

The two holding machine guns could only give forced smiles at the boring joke.

"Ah-, well, sis, for your information... We're cuttin' ties with our boss, Szilard. And, our last big event in this city is to slaughter that brat but, you know... who'd guess you'd be here too? So we'll go ahead and attack you while we're at it."

Although Dallas and his cohorts had heard that Ennis was also immortal, they judged that there'd be no problem if they escaped before she regenerated.

"No last words before you go to hell, brat?"

"We're curious as to how you acquired those guns... Mr. Dallas?"

The one who spoke was not Firo.

When Dallas fearfully turned to face the voice coming from behind, a gun was prodding his head. The other two had guns pressed against their heads in the same manner by Keith and Berga.

"He... hey, hey... Mr. Luck... Please forgive us..."

"All right, then please answer my question."

Luck's gun was pushed more forcefully between Dallas's eyebrows.

What were they doing here? It was highly improbable they were here because they had killed the four people, so Dallas desperately tried to think of a way to overturn the odds. If they were blown away by the guns here, Ennis would probably fetch Szilard, making an immortal body as good as nothing.

"... This gun is... it was found where that brat there, Firo, had hidden it..."

Dallas immediately uttered a lie. Without giving Ennis any time to deny his claim, he quickly continued babbling.

"Truth is, we were keeping a lookout to ambush that brat there last night... The brat was headed towards your hideout holding a machine gun, wasn't he? And after that, we heard the frightening sound of gunfire coming from your hideout..."

Dallas pushed the blame for the massacre last night to Firo. Even though it was a blatant lie, if his opponents' concentration

wavered for just one moment it would be OK. So long as the muzzle moved down by just a little... It'd be dangerous to be shot in the head, but if it was just the body then there'd definitely be no problem. Then he'd use that opportunity to slice open their throats with a knife...

"Why... do you know about what happened last night? It hasn't even been reported on the news..."

"Eh? B-because we were behind Firo..."

"... You think we're on bad terms with the Martillos...?"

"Ha?"

"And as for last night... We three were together with Firo."

"Wha..."

"A close brother brought up in the same apartment had received a promotion, so we attended his celebratory party last night... that's right, we stayed out very late... 'till right when Mike and the others were killed!"

Gunfire rang out, and part of Dallas's head was blown off. Following that, Keith and Berga discharged their guns. Their heads blown off in the same way, the remaining two collapsed with the machine guns in their hands.

"How can we let you shoulder the responsibility alone?"

"....."

Seeing his two older brothers grinning broadly, the youngest struggled with his words as he spoke.

"... Sorry. Berga-bro, Keith-bro... It seems I couldn't keep calm after all..."

"... Don't worry."

Keith had not spoken for almost a full day.

Firo, who had been watching everything, greeted the three men.

"You're a lifesaver."

"Nah... We heard the sound of machine guns, so we came around the back to see what was going on. Firo... It seems we have been completely left in the dark... Could you explain what happened?"

"I'll definitely explain afterwards. But for now I have to first find the Don... And this is..."

Only after speaking to this point did Firo realise he still didn't know the woman's name.

Meanwhile, Ennis was also extremely perplexed. Who were these three people? Should she tell them about the state of Dallas's and the others' bodies? And in the first place, Firo was also her enemy.

... But Ennis could no longer regard him as an enemy.

"Hey, big bro. These bodies, how should we hide them? ... Wait a sec... Hey, Luck, these guys are holding machine guns, so this counts as self-defence right?"

"Please wait! ... Before that, please tie up the three fallen people. .."

She said that without thinking.

Firo and the others looked disbelievingly at Ennis.

"They... though not complete, they're also 'immortals'..."

"... What?"

"Huh? Oy, what're you saying, sis? They're completely dead..."

As he spoke, Berga cast his eyes in the direction of the corpses. And, his expression froze.

"... What the hell?"

The head, which was originally blown apart, was repairing itself cleanly.

Then, those eyes flew open.

"Wha..."

In that instant, Berga's body shuddered violently. The rain of bullets coming from below pounded into Berga's body.

"ooOOooh... ooh..."

Blood spurted out from his bullet-peppered torso and he fell to the ground with a loud thud.

"Berga-bro...?"

"... Berga!"

It was not just the two other brothers, but even Firo and Ennis didn't understand what had happened.

"Why... can they regenerate so quickly...?"

Ennis didn't know that their heads had been damaged once, so their bodies were already used to regenerating this portion. To put it differently, their flesh was younger than those of the old men Ennis was used to seeing, so their innate regeneration speed would be faster.

Or perhaps their brains' fuses had no time to stop, so even though their heads had been blown off, Dallas and his cohorts regained consciousness as their brains regenerated.

Calm, composed, and unsmiling, Dallas and his cohorts swung the weapons in their hands at the remaining four people.

Fierce gunfire resounded in the alley.

"Weak... Is this all that's come of your two hundred years?"

Maiza was lying on the floor. His broken wrist was silently regenerating.

"You seem to have relied on your own power to train yourself, but I've used a more reasonable way. I gave the strong a 'failure'... That's right, made from half the knowledge of the refinement process you taught your younger brother... Well, while it cannot stop people from aging, they'll at least become indestructible. And, most importantly..."

One step by one step, Szilard stalked towards Maiza, who had not finished regenerating.

"... They can be 'eaten'... by us, who have drunk the 'complete product', and this is one-sided... That is to say, the strong drink the 'failure,' and I 'eat' them. Is there a more effective way of training? Hahahahahahahahahahaha!"

The wooden crate on the table was opened. Szilard checked whether the quantity of wine inside had been reduced.

"As I thought, no one has drunk it yet..."

"...? What is it?"

"... Oh, don't you know? This is... the 'elixir of immortality' we once drunk. I finally succeeded in completing it alone."

Although it was actually the work the brewer who was employed to complete the product, Szilard claimed it all as his own.

"... It can't be!"

"I don't you how you obtained this wine, but, well, everything will be clear once I've 'eaten' you. Hahahahahahahahaha..."

After giving a cold, mechanical laugh, Szilard looked down towards his feet.

"But... These guys are truly a company of fools."

He surveyed the corpses of the executives littered around the place.

"Or perhaps I could ask the 'demon' to grant me control of their souls?"

"... You... will never find out..."

"No, I will find out. I just have to 'eat' you know and I will know everything."

As Szilard stooped down, his right hand slowly stretched towards Maiza's head.

At this moment, the thunderous sound of gunfire came from outside.

"What's this...?"

He didn't remember Ennis carrying any machine guns. The earlier three shots of gunfire, he thought, were fired by that

youngster or his friends. Did guys armed with machine guns come as reinforcements?

For a brief moment, Szilard became a little distracted by the ongoings outside.

Maiza seized this momentary opening to grab Szilard's ankles with both hands and quickly stood up. In an instant, Szilard's body did a half-turn as it flipped down.

Although presented with his enemy's momentary opening, Maiza never thought of grabbing his head. He stepped onto a nearby table and crashed through at an elevated place between two windows. On nights when alcohol was sold, the shop would be sealed off with wooden covers, but during the day there was just a layer of glass.

A clear, crisp shattering sound. Accompanied by a shower of glass shards, Maiza's body flew out of the shop.

"... Don't run!"

Szilard followed behind and leapt out through the window.

Then, he was hit by a car.

"Hahaha, that was easy... let's get going before the woman regenerates..."

Dallas and his cohorts thought that the streets would be in chaos because of the sound of gunfire, so they decided to escape through an alley.

"...nn?"

Not long after turning a corner, they heard some noise ahead of them as they walked. It was the sound of what seemed like the running of a motor and something large bumping the sides of the walls.

"What's that...?"

The source of the sound appeared around the next corner.

"You've got to be kidding..."

Just enough to fit into the alleyway, it was a common black automobile.

"Aaah, Isaa-a-accc! W-w-w-we're b-b-b-bumping against the w-w-walll!"

The sound of the sides of the car scraping the walls pierced Miria's eardrums, who was being jostled around violently.

"T-t-t-t-to begin with, Isaac, can you drive such a large car?"

"I-i-i-i-i-it's okay! I've seen my dad drive this kind of car before and basically there's n-n-not much d-d-d-difference f-f-f-from a s-s-s-s-s-small carrrrrrr!"

"I-i-i-i-i-i-i-I seeee! Then I can relax, right-t-t-t?"

The two, while following Dallas and his cohorts, found the car that hit them. It was Ennis's car, but the two simply did not notice. No, they were absolutely certain this was the car that hit them.

Dallas had tweaked the car's engine. They had stolen quite a few small cars when escaping but they were quite skilful. Being part of the Genoard family did not seem to stop them from gaining superb stealing techniques.

"If we hit them with the car, we will definitely win against machine guns!"

"Win!"

They didn't feel the slightest bit guilty about stealing the car. It was all fine that they had entered the car, but they had lost track of Dallas and his cohorts.

Then the sound of machine gun fire came from a nearby alley.

"There there there!"

"There, right!"

Speeding up, they rushed towards the three people before their eyes.

Panicking, Dallas and his cohorts tried to escape and, just as they turned their backs, the car hit them. The impact sent them rolling up the bonnet and the roof, then down the back of the car.

"We did it!"

"Isaac! Front! Front!"

Before them, Maiza suddenly appeared.

"Wooah!"

Hastily, Isaac stepped on the brakes. Maiza had instantly noticed the car so he escaped, managing to avoid getting hit, but...

...the old man who came sailing down next was sent flying though the air.

As such, they had their revenge for the previous hit-and-run.

Isaac hurriedly braked the car.

- Actually "Isaac and the others", but Isaac is driving?

As for Dallas and his cohorts, who had fallen down from the back of the car, they couldn't move a single muscle.

"Uuh..."

Ennis, who had finished regenerating, slowly got to her feet.

"... Aah... Why... did something like this..."

Of all those who were gunned down by Dallas and his cohorts, only she herself was saved...

Unsure of what to do, she looked down at the bodies of Firo and the others beside her.

Then—--

Chasing Dallas and his cohorts, Ennis rounded the corner, where an oddly curious- but to her, a startling- scene unfolded.

Parked in that small alleyway was her own automobile. Before the car, Szilard was pressing knife against Isaac's throat. And in front of them was Maiza, who glared at Szilard and didn't move an inch.

"Ooh, Ennis. Hm... You came at a good time."

"Aah! Ennis!"

"Ennis! Save Isaac!"

The three men and woman called the woman's name together.

"... What's this?... Ennis, what is the meaning of this? Why do these two people know your name?"

Things had become tricky. Ennis had a troubled expression as she passed by Maiza. He didn't move, glowering at her.

It seemed Szilard had taken Isaac hostage to stop Maiza's escape. But she didn't understand why Isaac and Miria were here.

"Ennis. I will listen to your explanations later... Switch places with for me just a second. Until I have 'finished eating' Maiza... If you see Maiza resist, kill them."

"He- hey... Ennis?"

"Ennis?"

The duo both watched Ennis anxiously. Ennis suppressed the impatience in her heart and said,

"... Even so, you don't have to specially go out of the way to take a hostage..."

"Wha-at?... I grabbed him just as a precaution."

"....."

Ennis wordlessly accepted the knife and restrained Isaac in the same way.

"Aaah, Ennis, this is just a joke, right?"

"E- Ennis---!"

Glancing back at the commotion by Isaac and Miria, Szilard walked towards Maiza. He was about to complete the long-anticipated ritual.

The machine gun was wrecked when he had been run over just now, so Szilard pulled a handgun from his breast pocket and fired at Maiza's kneecaps.

"Gaah..."

His joints damaged, Maiza fell to his knees. This height was just right to let Szilard rest his right hand on his head.

"Kehehe... Are those two's lives that important? What a joke. No, no... I also know that sentiments like love and friendship exist, and that people are willing to give up their lives or draw out their full potential for them-"

Grinning, he took another step forward.

"-But they're also what I hate the most."

Watching Szilard stalk towards Maiza, Ennis spoke quietly to Isaac and Miria.

"... Once that old man touches Maiza's head... quickly escape from the scene..."

"E- Ennis...? Aah, thank goodness... It is Ennis after all!"

"Ennis, that's right!"

The two also replied quietly.

They don't know anything about me... Ennis was a little sad, but also a little happy.

"Ah... But we can't... We have to save Maiza..."

"Save Maiza!"

"... Why...!"

"Because yesterday... he invited us to a meal... Ennis, he's a good guy! We don't know who that gramps is, but please help us!"

"Help us! We insist!"

Ennis couldn't conceal her conflicted emotions, and fought to calm herself down as she asked the two,

"... You'll... help that person...?"

"No, we're helping Ennis!"

"Eh?"

Ennis' confusion further deepened.

"U-um... look! The guys Ennis took to the police escaped from jail yesterday and they were holding machine guns! So we thought they wanted to kill Ennis..."

"But you can relax! We ran them over with a car!"

They were still lying under the car.

"....."

Ennis became unable to articulate her feelings. Although they clearly knew their opponents had machine guns, they still came without the fear of death? All just for the sake of saving her?

In the space of a breath, this woman pondered many things. Though it seemed like much longer to her, the decision took only three seconds. She had never really seriously thought about the person who created her.

"... Mr. Isaac, Ms. Miria."

"... eh?"

"What is it?"

Words of farewell were always very short.

"I'm sorry... Thank you. I'm truly glad to be able to speak to you two at the very end... If you would just listen to my last selfish request..."

Seeing Miria's sad smile, Ennis quietly lowered the knife and released Isaac.

"Please don't forget me..."

Without waiting for Isaac and Miria's reply, Ennis dashed off with the knife in her hand.

She was returning to the owner of her body, to the original ' body', Szilard---

"Continuing from our earlier conversation... That woman wearing the suit just now is a homunculus I created... Well, at the same size as humans we can hardly call her a 'homunculus' any more, although I, too, feel that this technique using male and female cells as a base is a little heretical."

Szilard had a look of superiority on his face as he stopped his advance and looked down at Maiza. A gun was held in his left hand, the *conta è oro*'s despair in his right.

"Perhaps because the 'failure' was used in the culture, or because of the production process itself was wrong, Ennis... that girl, was born without any knowledge and useless... After 'eating' you I can use the 'complete product' as the culture fluid... No, since I already have your knowledge... I can just summon the ' demon' to ask."

Having finished his arrogant speech, Szilard reached out with his right hand to Maiza's head.

"Farewell, Maiza. And... welcome."

His right hand was about to touch the head that was its food when, in that instant, it happened.

“Guhh...?”

There was a forceful impact against his back and he felt something enter his body. As he no longer had the sense of pain, there was only a bizarre feeling of the shock spreading to the surrounding skin.

Szilard calmly turned his head to see the sorrowful face of Ennis .

The knife she was holding was stabbed deeply into Szilard’s spine.

“... Ennis... What is this? ... No, it’s fine. There's no longer a need for explanation.”

At the same time, a loud shout came from the corner of the street.

“Mr. Maiza!”

Firo, who should already be dead, hollered as he rushed over.

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Gunfire continued to sound in the *Alveare*.

"You four over there, split up and watch the exits of the alleyway. You are not to act freely without orders, because this alleyway is their territory..."

Edward had, on receiving a report, arrived on scene with a large number of police officers.

"... What happened?"

On pushing open both doors and entering the shop, he found the shopkeeper standing there dumbly.

"Ah, no... I don't understand it very well myself... I was suddenly dealt a blow by some weird geezer..."

Edward warily moved into the bar. En route he had the sound of machine gun fire, so he kept a grip on the gun in his hands and scrutinised the surroundings inside cautiously.

"... This is terrible."

The shop looked like the aftermath of a hurricane strike.

Broken chairs could be seen everywhere around the entrance, while the damage of a machine gun attack stretched out over every corner of the room.

After having made a survey of the surroundings, Edward seemed a little relieved as he muttered,

"At least for now, there're no dead people around here."

There wasn't a trace of blood to be seen in the room.

"Oooh... You let that brat pass through too... Ennis..."

Szilard slowly turned to face her.

"... 'How disappointing'... is not something I will say. What I really feel is 'it's about time'. I've created ones before you, but they always betrayed me whenever they obtained some unnecessary knowledge... I thought a female would change everything, so I created you... but in the end nothing's changed."

It was the first time Ennis knew about her own 'brothers'. But it no longer mattered any more.

She really wanted to just kick Szilard into the ground, but...

"It's useless."

"Ah..."

Szilard just thought of closing his eyes for a moment, and somehow Ennis was sprawled on the ground. It was nothing to be surprised about- it was just like a puppet having its strings cut.

In this instant, Szilard's energy that protected the balance of cells was disrupted, and every part of Ennis's body started to malfunction.

"I won't kill you just yet... Your death must be full of suffering."

A mocking smile appeared on the face, only to be disrupted by projectile lump of pepper.

"Gaah...!!"

An immortal, in possession vast quantities of 'knowledge', who desired to conquer the world. For such a man to actually be scared of the sting of pepper in his eyes was a comical sight.

"Bastard! What'd you do to Ennis!"

"What'd you do!"

The Father and nun threw the pepper in the bag in rapid succession. Although it seemed a little ridiculous, there was a sense of a demon exorcism with holy ash.

"Guh... You!"

At this moment, Firo, who had dashed in, pulled Ennis and Maiza far away from Szilard.

"Mr. Maiza! Are you all right?!"

The holes in his knees were already half-closed. Perhaps because it was the first time they were damaged, the recovery seemed somewhat slower than Dallas and his cohorts.

"I'm... fine... Me aside... That girl..."

Ennis's face had already become quite pale, and her pupils were clouding over. Even so, when she recognised Firo, even as she fought for breath, she slowly formed words.

"... You've... you... although I don't know when... have also obtained immortality... just now... when I saw your wounds heal... I couldn't understand..."

At that, Maiza stared at Firo with astonishment.

"Aah, I also have no clue about when it happened..."

"..... Then... I have a request... I... since I'm going to die anyway. .. please... please 'eat' me... the way... I described just now..."

"Don't say such crazy things, hey!"

"... Can a homunculus like me... go to heaven or hell? I'm just afraid that... I can't even end my life with my own hands... aah... I still.... have a lot I want to say to Mr. Isaac and Ms. Miria... so... please..... eat me... and pass on my message to them... and... this is the first time... someone has said I am beautiful... Thank you.... I'm very happy... I just wanted to tell you this....."

Hearing these words, Firo gripped her hand calmly... and shook his head.

"You don't have to feel obliged to tell me these things... and, I'm an atheist so stop it. There is no heaven or hell after death... if you die... there's nothing."

"... ahaha... you're really unforgiving..."

Ennis gave a somewhat regretful smile. In the meanwhile, her cells were still continually breaking down. At this point, her heart had already stopped beating. The instant Ennis died... Szilard's portion of the constituent parts that made up this woman would return to the original body.

As Firo stood up, he stated clearly,

"Aah... this world *is* that unforgiving, and there isn't some other world... so don't die, because if you disappear you can't pass on your message!... Don't worry, if you were to die... I would never forgive that shitty geezer... Unless... you're telling me you want to die....?"

As though thinking something over, Firo drew his knife and headed straight towards Szilard, who was shaking off the pepper.

Szilard glared back at Firo with furious eyes.

"Young man... What do you plan to do...?"

From behind, something was poured onto his head.

"...?"

It was a liquid with a piercing smell. This was liquid fuel for lamps and the like.

Szilard turned back to look, and there stood the executives with Randy at fore. Although the sections of their clothing that were hit by bullets were tattered, there was not even a drop of bloodstain.

"You... should already have been killed! It can't be... There wasn't less wine... And... Maiza would never let you drink it...!"

Szilard shouted as he looked at Maiza. Maiza had the same expression as Szilard. Clearly, he didn't expect this to happen either.

"What're you babbling about?"

Held in Randy's hand was an empty fuel canister.

"We've burned gloves and a storehouse before, but y'know..."

Thrown by Pezzo's hand was a burning match.

"Setting a head on fire is a first for us."

Szilard's entire head was covered by blue-white flames.

"*Guh-ooooooooooooooh...!!!*"

Because he had no sense of pain, he couldn't feel the searing heat. But the wildly dancing flames had snatched away Szilard's field of vision.

Even so, Szilard could just about make out the youngster called Firo coming at him.

Was that guy an immortal too?

--- If that was the case.

Fear sprang up in Szilard.

"*Uooooooooooh*! I won't let youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!"

Seeing Firo, who was closing in, he quickly stretched out his right arm.

"Out of the way! You damned right hand!"

Firo unleashed his wild emotions and slashed down with the knife he had drawn from his breast pocket.

The knife travelled along a line between the index and middle finger, splitting Szilard's right hand right down to the wrist. The knife, caught by the bone, was pushed down hard by its owner.

Firo stretched out his own right hand towards Szilard's face, which was wreathed with flames.

It didn't matter if his own hand was roasted.

The youth prayed hard.

Hatefully, that the body before his eyes would be completely devoured.

To save the nameless girl, to obtain such 'knowledge'.

"*Gah...*"

This ending was far too simple for a man who had lived for over 300 years.

And---

All that was left in the world of Szilard Barnes were his burning clothes and shoes.

And even these turned to ashes that, when lifted by a breeze, scattered to some unknown place.

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Edward pushed open the back door just as Szilard's shoes started to burn.

"... What's the..."

Officers, like Edward, simply had no way of knowing what had happened. Shoes were burning, the Martillo executives were gathered, the Father and nun from just now were present, a car with a battered frame was parked in the alleyway, and there was a stench of fuel hanging in the air.

"What's going on... Explain, Firo Prochainezo!"

Striding over briskly, Edward grabbed the collar of the youth with a weary face.

"It looks like no one has died here... Are you trying to tell me you're planning a gun orchestra?"

"..... What's the matter?"

"Drop the innocent act! There've been complaints about the endless gunfire here from ordinary citizens! Do you want me to arrest you for violating the Swords and Firearms Control Law?"

At this moment, the thunder of gunfire rang out around them.

The police officers hurriedly ducked, hands reaching into their breast pockets as they searched for the source of the sound.

On the car were a Father and a nun, brandishing machine guns at the sky. They were Tommy-guns that belonged to Dallas and his cohorts.

"*Fuhahahahaha*! We have taken the Martillo family's treasure!"

"Taken it, yup!"

"Farewell, o incompetent policemen! And for your information, the Martillos didn't do anything!"

"Didn't do anything, yup!"

Having sprouted some words off the top of their heads, the two threw down the weapons and ran off. Although they were

showing their concern for Firo and the others in their own way, the last line was the equivalent of saying 'the Martillos did do something'.

"... Inspector... um...? Is it all right to shoot?"

"No... They were unarmed just now..."

Why a Father? After a little thought, he realised something when he recalled one of his objectives.

"... The mummy robbers!"

"... Huh?"

"Whatever, just chase after those guys! As long as they don't have guns, don't shoot!"

Seeing the bewildered faces of his underlings, Edward rapidly issued orders.

The police officers started a quick chase after them, leaving Edward the only police-affiliated person on the scene.

"Now... Don't think you can trick me just like that, Firo."

At this moment, two new men appeared from the shop.

"Ah-... Mr. Edward, you're already here..."

"There's something you need to assist us with. Come with us for a moment."

It was Bill and Ronald.

"But..."

"We'll tell you what you want to know."

"... What's going on?"

"Come and find out."

Ronald said tonelessly. Edward was a little baffled, but ended up following them.

After Edward disappeared into the shop, Bill greeted Maiza.

"Ah-... How is Szilard?"

Hearing that, Maiza looked closely at the man before him.

When he saw his true form, Maiza gave a point-blank answer.

"Aah... That guy... has already disappeared."

"Eh-... Into your body?"

Maiza gave a somewhat mischievous smile as he answered,

"This is our organisation's secret, how can we leak it to those who are affiliated with the police?"

After the police officers had left, Maiza asked Firo a question,

"Firo... I'm at a loss. When did everyone turn immortal...? You have already received Szilard's knowledge. You should understand what I mean?"

"Ah... no..."

Firo bashfully confessed.

"Yesterday, I helped an old man, see."

"Yeah..."

"That time, I secretly switched the wine that old man was holding: I emptied two of the four bottles of wine we bought for containers... then filled them with the stuff in the old man's bottles and gave the remaining two to that geezer..."

Firo was very casual about this. If that old man had given his sincere thanks, he would have returned the wine, but if he refused to fix his bad attitude, he planned to steal it away just like that.

"Stolen goods must be shared. I was just following the Camorra rules..."

"You can't mean... You shared it with everyone during the party?"

"... Now that I think about it... Even if I gave up one bottle of wine, I could still have switched over his two bottles perfectly..."

This didn't really count as a big problem.

"Firo..."

"No--, with Szilard's knowledge at hand, I understand everything, but... Mr. Maiza..."

Firo gave the dazed Maiza a brief, wry smile.

"It seems coincidences really do exist in this world..."

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The Father and nun kept running. Alleyway after alleyway, towards that fleeting moment of freedom.

The clamour of a crowd's voices were growing louder, proof that they were getting close to the streets.

"Crap!"

"Krap!"

Just as the exit to the alleyways came into view, they noticed the two policemen standing there.

And it seemed they had seen them too, so Isaac and Miria slowed their speed and shouted as loudly as they could,

"Aah! Mr. Officer, please save us!"

"Save us!"

Although it was an impromptu lie, their attire gave them a certain persuasiveness. Because it was so sudden, the police officers were hesitant to restrain the man and woman.

Miria leapt into one officer's bosom, shaking exaggeratedly as she said,

"J-, j-j-j-just now some people holding weapons were chasing after us!"

This wasn't a lie.

Faced with an unfamiliar situation, the two officers' reactions to their words were a little extreme. Reaching to their weapons at their waists, they looked towards the other direction of the alley anxiously.

... But what appeared around the corner was a group of familiar uniforms.

"Wha...!"

By the time the two police officers had looked back, the duo had dashed in and mingled with the crowds.

These two officers mounted the NYPD-exclusive horses they had brought along, intending to chase. But they were prevented from doing so by the very citizens they were pledged to protect.

"Merry Christmas!"

Isaac shouted as he tossed the rolls of banknotes from his bag into the sky.

"Ahahahahahaha! You're too early, too early! Early by a month!"

As Miria laughed loudly, the streets turned into a coliseum.

The crowd started to fight each other over the thrown paper notes, which flurried down like snow. Men holding 'I want to work' placards, beggars who cried because their legs were broken, ladies who came to buy wine, transportation truck drivers, horse-cart drivers, and even the wealthy with cash in their pockets - when they saw the easy money falling above like mana from heaven, they started scrabbling for it.

To be faster, to have more, to have a stronger desire to grab the money... this was the simple set of rules that accompanied the battle-royale on the battlefield. Confronted with waves of frenzy and delirium, the horses were simply unable to cope with the fighters' killing intent.... and even if they were, they wouldn't be able to break up the crowds.

Leaving behind the panicked and confused policemen, Isaac and Miria continued walking towards the station. Scattering money and running to hide one's traces was one of the most basic knowledge for any bank robber. It was because everyone knew about it that this was effective... Isaac fully believed in it, and it did work very well in reality.

If there was any problem, it would be that, at the station, most of their loot (99% from the Genoards' inheritance) was gone.

Then again, they wouldn't be who they were if they cared about these kinds of big problems.

"Now then... Where should we run to, Miria?"

"Anywhere would do!"

"I see-... To make up for our losses, why don't we go gold-mining?"

"The Gold Rush, right?! But then, this means we won't be robbers... Are we washing our hands of dirty business?"

"Ah---... In other words, it is, that. The amount of money we'll earn will be as large as the Earth!"

"Amazing!"

They still continued their usual type of dialogue, but they both regretted one thing.

"... We didn't say our goodbyes to Ennis and the others, did we. "

"... That's right."

At the entrance of the train station, the robber-duo once again turned back to look at this city.

Staring at the dizzying city, Isaac murmured softly,

"It was an interesting city."

"Interesting, yup!"

"I want to come again, to meet up with Ennis and the others."

"We definitely will!"

Isaac took out the last roll of bills from the bag and headed inside the station to buy train tickets to California.

"In the end, this is all we have left."

"Mm... But everyone has gained something, so isn't it a good thing? For us too!"

"Really...? I see. The deceased Mr. Genoard must also be very happy, right?"

"And those dead children too!"

"Then, our theft brings happiness to the Genoard children."

"That's right! There's no more fighting over the inheritance, so they must be getting along very well!"

At the very end of the day, these two still continued speaking in the same way. Thus, the couple that were the guests of honour in this *baccano* were about to disappear from the stage of NY. baccano : Italian for commotion, loud noise

Just before they boarded the train, the two saw a signboard saying 'Welcome to NY!'.

On that street, Isaac left a footprint on the signboard as remembrance.

This graffiti later became the inspiration for the big bite mark in the Big Apple drawing that symbolised New York.

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When Dallas Genoard awoke, he found himself in what seemed to be a dark warehouse.

"Have you woken?"

Before him were the trio he had definitely killed.

As for himself, his hands and feet were bound and he was in a drum canister. With his face protruding outside, he looked around fearfully. His two other comrades were also in the same predicament as he.

"Aah, this place is something like a villa for us... Our homes and hideout are all being watched by the police..."

"Wh-Why... Why're you guys alive!?"

At Dallas's cry, Luck answered as the representative of the brothers.

"Who knows? Why indeed...? Just now I asked Firo over the phone... I have no reason to tell you, so please curse your longevity with all your might."

They had also attended that party. Since that was the case, the toast meant they had also joined the ranks of immortality. Naturally, Dallas and his cohorts had no way of knowing that this had passed.

Before Dallas could speak, Keith came up and dropped something into the drum.

It was a stack of poker cards.

"....?"

"Keith-bro is so kind, huh... While waiting to age to death at the bottom of the ocean, you will have plenty of free time to spare, right? ...That's why-"

When the meaning of those words sunk in, Dallas and his cohorts were assailed by a hopeless terror.

The 52 jokers dropped into the drum jeered coldly at Dallas's fate.

"That you can continually drown for 70 years without dying is astounding... Or maybe it's the world that's astounding? I'm very sorry, but there will be no records left of you..."

"We'd love to kill you, but since you won't die from bullets or fists, it can't be helped... Oh yes, if you get bored, how about listening to the radio?"

Berga asked cheerily.

"Hahaha, the batteries will run out."

"I see... Then, what about chess?"

"The chess pieces will float in water... How do the Conan Doyle novels sound?"

"The paper will get soggy."

"Hahahahaha!"

"Gahahahahaha!"

".....heh.."

After laughing for a while, the three together turned their eyes on Dallas.

Those incredibly gazes were enough reason for tears to fill Dallas's eyes.

"Now... choose. Which do you prefer?"

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The gathering ground of 'members'. The old men all gathered there at night, but there was no sign of Szilard... instead, 5-6 police officers were waiting for them. Among them, Edward, Bill and Ronald could be seen.

"Wh... who're you!"

"Ah-.... Police."

Facing the old men who were in an uproar, Edward gave a simple explanation.

"Ah-.... There were suspicious that you were secretly producing alcohol, so we came to investigate."

"What... What evidence do you have!"

"Eh--.... it's that, there was a fire yesterday and this was left in the wake of the flames."

An ash-covered bottle was taken out. It was an intact bottle Barnes was responsible for managing.

"Hm-.... It has nothing to do with you, hm... Then-"

It seemed the bottle was going to be thrown to the floor. The old men let out a collective lamenting wail.

"Ooh? ...Maybe it's best to find someone who understands things better to help."

"You're taking the game too far, Bill."

Ronald continued from him.

"Your organization has been on the Bureau's radar for a long time. Be it Szilard or the wine you wish to produce."

There was commotion among the old men.

"Why... Why does the 'Bureau' know about Master Szilard..."

"Ah-.... it's because we've got some long-lived fellows among our superiors... To be frank, our real purpose in coming to New York is concerning their orders... to handle this 'wine' incident."

"Our Bureau's motto is 'cases will never end'. Just as our superior had said, this is the same as the incident that could not be explained by science 200 years ago."

"He- hey! Edward!"

He heard a voice calling for him. It was the superior who topped his 'most loathed' list, Commander Verde. Even the top police officials were Szilard's followers... But at the same time, the reality was that this was the most power Szilard could seize.

"Edward! Stop them somehow! As long as we have this medicine, we can take over the world! We will become superior to normal humans! You want this kind of power too, right? So...!! Hey, Edward! Say something!"

Despite his boiling anger, or perhaps because of it, Edward chose to remain calm.

Even laughter threatened to bubble up. But no, he could only smile.

"Commander... If you had at least said something along the lines of 'the world will suffer from diseases and accidents no more' , I might still have considered it... In truth, you have disappointed me greatly."

"E- Edward!"

"Commander... between eternity for myself and my country for all time, I choose an everlasting nation..."

Edward took the bottle from Bill's hand.

"And more than just my duty as a police officer, I cannot tolerate any existence created by violating laws."

Without any hesitation, he hurled the bottle into a corner of the room.

Accompanying the wails of the old men, the bottle shattered into pieces.

Some of the old men seemed to want to lap up the wine pooling on the floor, but, as though he had anticipated this, Ronald lit a match and tossed it onto the floor.

The alcohol rapidly caught fire, beautifully illuminating the despairing faces of the old men for a fleeting moment.

One of the officers dashed the buckets of water he was holding onto the fire. In an instant, both the fire and dreams of immortality were extinguished. From the very beginning, they had been planning to break those bottles before these old men.

"Ah-.... And what's left... is for you to work hard, serving the country before old age catches up. And your efforts will determine whether your names will go down in history as one of the cornerstones of this country, don't you agree? Also... ah, incidentally, Mr. Szilard won't be coming again."

After bidding farewell to the old men, who were busy fainting or weeping, Edward and the others departed, leaving the basement behind.

Sitting in the shaky car driven by Ronald, Edward muttered accusingly,

"... So you tricked me."

At first, Edward had absolutely refused to believe anything said about the wine of immortality. But when he discovered that rat at

the scene of the fire... Once he saw the rat that was alive even though it was on fire, he was forced to believe, whether he liked it or not.

"Ah-.... Sorry..."

"But why did you tell me everything?"

At this question, Ronald gave a simply response.

"Our superior... isn't one of the top guns at the Bureau, but someone with an equivalent position... He likes you for never bending to bribery nor violence, and your strong, albeit somewhat skewed, sense of justice."

"... Why me?"

"You aspire to join the Bureau. We investigate much more about candidates than you think."

"....."

"Eh-.... We look forward to working with you in the future."

Bill and Ronald gave him wide grins.

Edward shook his head, smiling wryly, and replied to his two future seniors,

"... By then, you better not be hiding anything from me."

Afterwards, Edward became a part of the Bureau... later known as the FBI, as one of the leading investigators. At the time, he hadn' t learned that Firo and the others had attained immortality, but once he knew, his pet phrase became 'Sentenced them for life, and let them spend the rest of eternity in prison'... Every time he thought of Firo and Maiza, he would repeat the line above with a smile on his face.

<==>

"..... aah....."

After Edward and the others had left, Maiza collapsed to his knees.

"Wha- what's wrong, Mr. Maiza!"

"What in the world... did I do..."

Having heard everything from Firo, Maiza was overwhelmed by guilt. Because of him, all his friends, including Firo, had been sucked into the never-ending cycle.

"Eh? Wait a sec...? What're you saying, Mr. Maiza?!"

"Giving the pain of eternal life... of all things, to you people..."

"What're you saying?! We don't mind at all! Rather, not dying's great- kinda makes me feel like going 'yahoo!'. Right, everyone?"

Firo hastily refuted Maiza's way of thinking and turned to Randy and the others for support.

"Eh? I-I don't really get it, but 'yahoo'!"

"'Yahoo'-! Cheer up, Maiza."

Randy and Pezzo leaped forward. They didn't seem to get the business about immortality. The other executives also weren't very clear about it themselves, but when they saw the two dancing around, they started to laugh out loud and cheer.

"Look, if Don and Mr. Yagulma don't say anything, people'll mistake it for 'longevity'!"

But the look of distress did not disappear from Maiza's face.

"Firo... You should understand with Szilard's knowledge, right... Truth be told... I'm tired of living... My brother's grudge, Szilard, is also dead, so now there's no more meaning to my life... that's it, Firo... I..."

Having listened up to this point, Firo replied with a somewhat serious expression.

"No way!...If you weren't here, which one of us would deal with the accounts?... Mr. Maiza, are you trying to ruin this organization?"

"... Damn, we need a *conta è oro* ... Ah, wait a moment please, if you 'ate' me, then my accounting knowledge would..."

"No way. I'm stupid, so even if I received the knowledge I'll probably forget it soon enough... Right now, I'm already starting to forget the knowledge I got from Szilard..."

"Why is it always a 'no'...?"

"You know, Mr. Maiza... One of the laws of the Camorra states that, no matter what the reason, if one kills a friend they would be rewarded with death... I don't want to die yet, so please forgive me ."

"... How troublesome... Just because you can't find a *conta è oro*... "

Maiza grinned. Firo grinned back.

"*Also*... if Mr. Maiza disappeared I would get lonely, so please live on."

And, gradually, the two started laughing.

"Um..."

At a woman's voice, they turned their heads to look, and saw a young woman in a black suit standing there.

"Why... am I..."

After obtaining Szilard's knowledge, the first thing Firo did was to restore new life to Ennis's near-dead cells. In sympathetic response with her immortal cells, the link of life Szilard had severed once again joined together. If Ennis was said to be a part of Szilard... then it wasn't an exaggeration to say she was now part of Firo.

"Ah-! Right, right! Because that Edward fellow suddenly came, so I completely forgot about you... Sorry!"

Ennis just looked bewildered.

"My name is Firo Prochainezo. ...I was looking for you because you're fascinating and attractive. I helped you because I want to ask you something."

"Want to ask something...?"

Looking at the perplexed Ennis, Firo smiled as he said,

"... I want to know your name."

"Eh.....?"

After a moment's thought, Ennis answered,

"Is it not... in Szilard's knowledge?"

Firo shook his head hard, smiling embarrassedly.

"Ah-... That's... How to put it? ... I wanted to hear it from you."

Hearing Firo's words, the surrounding people clamoured up around the two. 'Wait a sec, you're not confessing, are you?! You' re still school children!'...Firo didn't hear any objections of this sort . With Randy and Pezzo as the leaders, everyone started cheering ' yahoo yahoo' excitedly.

Just like the happy ending in a movie... everyone present was laughing.

"That commotion just now was really impressive, wasn't it... Exactly what on earth happened?"

"... Nothing, just that a Father has gone around scattering rolls of banknotes."

Walking along the streets resounding with countless beggars' voices, Ronny politely replied to the Don.

"Ooh?... the so-called Fathers just think of it a profession which uses the name of God to curry favours, but this Father on the other hand seems doing quite well, hm... Even God doesn't normally save his own believers..."

Hearing Yagulma's cold, curt thoughts, Molsa opened his mouth and rebuked him,

"Yagulma... Don't underestimate this thing called God. It can hurt you sometimes... There are times when you fall into a depression you cannot pull yourself out of. I just wanted to make this point."

The top executives who had returned after completing their business. For some reason many police officers were surrounding their store, so as a precaution they decided to go around the back. And so they saw all the executives stirring up a ruckus.

"What's this? Why's everyone outside?"

Yagulma tilted his head in disbelief.

Ronny had a somewhat surprised expressed as he looked hard at Firo and the others.

"I had noticed it last night during the toast... but I ended up not stopping it. ...I can't imagine what it'll be like... If we all became long-lived..... *Well, no matter*."

"Hm? What, you're mumbling something."

"Nah... You look happy, don't you?"

"Anyway, youth is a wonderful thing."

The Don spoke as he embraced the mountain of pepper*, and the two smiled as they nodded.

- To clarify, the Don is very fond of black pepper (seen from the party scene), and Isaac and Miria had stolen all the pepper at the party. So he went out and bought a lot.

The spiral had completely collapsed. What emerged from the rubble...

There, a new spiral started once again.

But what has changed...

Is that this spiral will continue on forever.

Well, that's it.

Epilogue 2

"Now then... the story ends here."

I was so absorbed in listening it was like being 'eaten'. A hand knocked a 'pon' on the table before I remembered I was someone in the year 2002.

"In this story, there are no world-destroying monsters, no princesses locked in high towers, or treasures that can buy the entire world. Even so, this is a very splendid 'legend' to us."

I was completely drawn in by his words. Putting aside whether it was real or not, the story was extremely interesting. But was it really possible for so many coincidences to keep happening?

"Hahaha, isn't the world's history a tangle of coincidences?"

I didn't really understand, but putting everything together made it very persuasive.

"... Did you believe it? The story just now absolute nonsense."

You're kidding, right?

"I'm not."

In that case, nothing- wasn't it good? Unless there were going to be questions?

Seemingly satisfied with this answer, the man said 'My treat' and even paid for my dessert.

"You're a really strange person, thinking that this is a good story... Even though it's a legend, it's rare to come by listeners like you..."

It didn't sound like praise. Rather, it sounded like subtle mockery.

But... Just where was the 'story of the loneliness of the sorry man'?

"Szilard's a lonely and sorry guy, isn't he?"

..... I see.

But what happened to those who appeared in the story? Such as that robber couple...

"But aren't they here now?"

He gazed further into the shop at the stupid-looking couple. The two's bodies were completely wrapped in chains, and they were happily hanging lots of bells on each other's chains. It was on the same level as pop culture.

Then, the skinny and fat ones sitting in that corner were...

"Pezzo and Randy. Pezzo's been complaining recently that 'I want to slim down because this body's too fat, but the fat keeps growing back', but even now he can still eat five meals."

..... Then, what about Firo?

"Ha?"

His expression became strange.

"Isn't he right here? .....Ah, I got carried away with the storytelling and narrated my own story like it was someone else's.. . Ah... That's right, I have yet to introduce myself. Well, normally with business associations, I just leave without having ever said my name..."

... What was going on? I had always thought that this man was Maiza...

"Aah, Maiza-san... He taught me the ABC's of being *conta è oro* and has been travelling since 30 years ago... Something about searching for his alchemist comrades who're scattered around the world... But according to the promise, it should be about time he returns..."

So that was how it was... But his image was completely different from what I had expected. I told him straight.

"That's because more than 70 years have passed... Even someone like me would remember one or two manners... As for these glasses, they're just smart, decorative glasses. So what do you think?"

As he said that, Firo Prochainezo gave a happy smile. He sure was lucky. I was a little envious.

That reminded me- how was Ennis doing now?

"Aah, she's my wife."

... This fellow really made one turn green with envy.

"Ah, no... It's just... Un, if it were in some romance novel or picture book, the two people should fall in love with each other at that time... then you'd expect things to develop from there."

Firo continued a little embarassedly.

"See... Ennis then was a skirt without much ability to feel love... um... So I was the only one who was excited... Maa, after all, this falling head over heels in love at first sight was just one-sided for me..."

A somewhat desolate smile touched his lips as he admitted the truth.

"I ended up spending a damn long time in the blind pursuit for marriage... Only, what... 50 years...?"

So the story was cruel at times. ...The problem of being a late bloomer.

To be together for over half a century still not tire of each other. Rather, it appeared that these two just grew so close they couldn't be separated anymore.

No, wait... Ennis appeared to be part of Firo's body... So in some sense, wasn't this narcissism? Because this thought was too crass, I didn't say it aloud.

"Maa, many things have happened, but somehow or another we always manage to succeed... Since the abolishment of the Prohibition Act, our revenues fell sharply and we were in dire straits..."

Then, he grumbled for a while about the harshness of fighting to secure new income, the turf wars and the life. .....But I knew that, all the while, they were very happy. Although it was other people's good fortune, I felt as happy as if it were my own.

"Do you know? Eliot Ness... the Prohibition agent who was the main character of 'The Untouchables', alcoholism ruined the later years of his life... Isn't it ironic?"

Just as we were getting into flow of the conversation, the young man from earlier returned. In his hand was the shiny, silver camera bag! Welcome back, my camera!

"Aah, Ronnie-san... Thank you for your hard work."

"Not at all, since I'm free anyway... there weren't any special problems. But that Bobby guy is a real idiot, doing as he wishes on our territory."

Ronnie..... Aah, the person in the post of 'chiamatore' in the organisation...

"Well, no matter. Just as you said, 'grilling' them in a suitable manner would be good, no?"

... Was he Firo's accomplice? How should I put it... Why did even this Ronnie speak such fluent Japanese? Moreover, he even used the word 'grill', a special term used by yakuza.

"Well then, I'll be calculating the value of this item, so please wait a moment."

As soon as he said that, he headed further into the store... and disappeared behind the door that seemed the sort only authorised people could enter. Goodbye, camera. Then again, I had promised to pay a cut.

Ronnie looked my way, grinning broadly.

Come to think of it... at the very end of Firo's legend, he was described as someone like the 'demon'... For the sake of seeing how the immortals wound up, the demon may have very well

disguised himself as a member of the organisation. ... If it was the demon... Then it was reasonable for him to know a word like 'roast '. For some reason I felt that way.

Inadvertently, I blurted out the thought in my head- 'If you are the demon, then show me the evidence'.

I had no memory of what passed in the next few minutes, except for the incredible terror of Ronnie etched into my heart. The emotion that I had forgotten since the bear attack. ...Just what had I done?

Facing my stunned self, Ronnie said quietly,

"Strictly speaking I am no demon... Just an alchemist who had obtained too much knowledge during ancient times..."

After that, I paid the returning Firo 300 dollars for my camera.

But... what if, earlier, I ran away when Firo stabbed his own wrist with his knife, what would have happened?

"Eh? ...Then naturally I'd profit from the camera. That's why I didn't introduce myself, and why I didn't ask for your name. In these million-in-one situations, it's advantageous to make little judgements of what benefits me..."

Why did it turn out like this? My wishful thinking and fantasy that 'good gangsters still existed' were instantly quashed. ...For the first time since I came to this city, I erupted into gales of laughter.

"Aah, you finally laughed. Generally, the Japanese give blank smiles, but you had virtually no expression whatsoever."

Why, thank you.

"At any rate... Back then, you said something like 'mind your manners before your elders'... Edward... Actually, that was what Paul said the first time we met... Although there are some differences in wording, but you said exactly the same thing as he did... If it hadn't happened, I probably wouldn't have wanted to intimidate you... If you weren't a person with no fear, then this legend wouldn't have been told, don't you think?....."

Was it really just because of these? These reasons you just told me about.

When I enquired about that, his gaze wandered as though he was a little puzzled, then he smiled as he spoke.

"... Truth be told, somehow, recently... I feel like my connection with the world is thinning. Our stay in this world will be longer than anyone else's, so... perhaps I was hoping to connect to some people from the outside world. Especially with an honest person such as yourself... For those like us, it is enough to know that such people exist... perhaps because we wish to be satisfied with ourselves. With that, I feel like a weight's been lifted off today..."

"I want to visit Japan once next time Mr. Maiza comes back. If you don't mind, please be our guide then?"

No problem. I handed a piece of paper with my address and phone number to him. If it were Japanese in Japan, they would never give their phone numbers to others... as I pondered that, I finally succeeded in getting my bag back. Well, only after paying some money.

"Before you come, be sure to send a letter."

Having made the simple farewell, I left the store behind me. This was a ridiculously simple farewell.

The Manhattan Bridge could be seen. After walking along this street for a while, the signboard of a large hat store caught my eye. Was this the shop where Firo and Maiza bought their hats?

I casually strolled into the shop. Every type of the most trendy hats were present, and over half had bandannas or buckets as accessories. The Japanese helmet... was nowhere to be seen.

The shopkeeper was a young woman. Come to think of it... the old man who never spoke wasn't an immortal. That was only to be expected, but it made me feel terribly sad.

To my side, a tall man had taken up a bandanna. The man had selected a vivid, pearl-green, and he gave the impression of being about 10 years older than Firo.

Maiza Avaro.

I shouted without thinking.

The man turned to me and said something. But unfortunately my grasp of English was nonexistent.

Repeating '*so-ri-*' many times, I left, the look of disbelief returning to my face.

..... Maiza. He had returned. There was no doubt about it. That was really Maiza.

Winning the grand prize I didn't want, accidentally running into robbers on Martillo territory... Among the 30,000 NY police, meeting Paul Noah purely by chance... and repeating Noah's words to the same person, and... being a person somewhat insensitive to fear... What kind of probability was it?

In the beginning, I sighed about my bad luck but... today might not be so bad after all.

The eternal prison. The spiralling prison. Those who were involved and myself, who had experienced a last 'chance meeting' with Maiza, were we really trapped in such a prison? (!)

While I pondered such things, I had already returned to Narita Airport.

2002 Summer Ikebukuro

A room that's like a steambath, three tatami wide... In some senses it was like a jail.

Sweating heavily, I checked the souvenirs for family and friends ... and also my camera.

Inside the film case that was never once used,

“As thanks for listening to my story.”

Under the slip with the crooked hiragana words were three 100 dollar bills.

The money I had given to Firo had been placed within, in the very state I had given him.

Although he said he wanted to tour Japan, how would he explain the age on his passport to immigration?

I really look forward to seeing his expression then.

While thinking such idle thoughts, I'm still waiting for that airmail to come to this very day.